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the art of group FREE SAMPLE talk

how to lead
better
conversations
with



teenage
guys



the art of group talk

HOW TO LEAD
BETTER CONVERSATIONS
WITH TEENAGE GUYS

**“Guys, I just love [deep voice crack]
this group.”**

RILEY, 8TH GRADE

**“Hey, thanks for leading our group . . .
even though I never listened to you.”**

JEFF, 8TH GRADE

**“Why do you want to lead our group?
Do you not have a life?”**

SCOTT, 9TH GRADE

**“If I decide to get baptized,
can I take my shirt off so
everyone can see my muscles?”**

CHAD, 10TH GRADE

“I can really relate to King David because he liked women and I really like women too.”

MATT, 12TH GRADE

“Why did the Apostle Paul want to remain single? That seems dumb to me.”

GAVIN, 11TH GRADE

“I don’t understand how Josiah was 8 years old and became king. I’m 12 years old and I don’t even know how to make my bed.”

PETER, 6TH GRADE

“The last time I had to ask someone for forgiveness was when I carved my name into the side of my dad’s car with a shovel.”

JACE, 11TH GRADE

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Table of Contents

10	INTRODUCTION
	CHAPTER 1
18	PREPARE
	CHAPTER 2
32	CONNECT
	Before a teenage guy can connect with God, he may need to connect with people who are connected with God.
	2.1 - Connect with them.
	2.2 - Help them connect with each other.
	CHAPTER 3
58	KNOW
	Before a teenage guy can know God, he may need to be known by people who know God.
	3.1 - Know them.
	3.2 - Help them know each other.
	CHAPTER 4
92	ENGAGE
	Before a teenage guy can engage in a life of authentic faith, he may need to engage in a conversation about authentic faith.
	4.1 - Speak less, listen more.
	4.2 - Control less, lead more.
	4.3 - Script less, improvise more.
	CHAPTER 5
142	MOVE
152	CONCLUSION
156	AUTHOR BIOS

Foreword

This is a book about how to have better conversations with teenage guys.

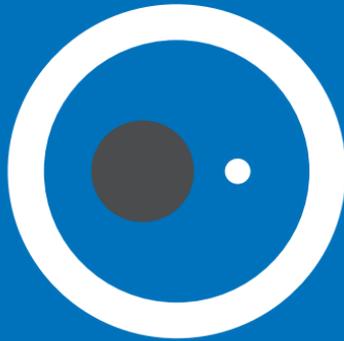
Because, as a small group leader, you lead a conversation with teenage guys every single week. Conversations about . . .
their lives.
their dreams.
their friends.
their more-than-friends.
and their *definitely-not* friends.

And sometimes, you even manage to lead conversations about faith.

This is a book to remind you that your small group conversations—even the ones that don't go exactly as planned—**really matter**.

But there are a few ways to make your conversations **matter even more**.

**create a
safe place**



**clarify their
faith as
they grow**

Introduction

You probably signed up to be a small group leader (or SGL for short) because you wanted . . .
to make a big difference.
to change the world.
to invest in a few teenage guys so you could help them develop a lifelong, authentic kind of faith.

We call that **leading small**.

Maybe you didn't know *exactly* what you were getting into when you signed up to be an SGL, but you probably at least knew this:

Leading a small group means leading a weekly small group conversation.

Kind of obvious, right?

But the truth is that figuring out how to lead a conversation isn't always obvious. It's not even easy to lead a conversation with adults sometimes. So, throw in a group of teenage guys, their hormones, their partially developed brains, and did we mention their hormones, and it becomes even more challenging.

I (Brett) have learned this the hard way (maybe even a few times) as I've led groups through the years. Each time I would begin leading a group, I had some pretty big expectations for how those weekly small group conversations should look and the immediate impact they

would bring to the lives of my few. For some reason, I thought they would walk into group with the same hopes and assumptions as me, ready to open up, to share our lives in true community, to ask the hard questions they'd been wrestling with, and to have long and meaningful conversations about who God is and what that means for us each week. (Spoiler alert: That never happened. At least not at the beginning of the groups.)

Before I became an SGL, I expected to lead small group conversations where every guy . . .
paid attention.
participated.
opened up.
came prepared.
listened to one another when someone did share.
asked deep theological questions.
decided to devote themselves to full-time ministry.
and read the Bible every day just because they wanted to.

But it never failed: our group would start our time together and, well, you can guess how close they got to meeting my expectations. I would be so excited to guide this group to where God was leading us. I had a path I wanted to take them down, but it was almost as if I was trying to get us there in a church van from 1974 that had a busted axle, that's alignment was off, and was minutes away from a total breakdown.

If you've been an SGL for more than five minutes, then you already know what I've learned—that leading a conversation with a group of teenage guys doesn't always live up to your expectations. (Especially if your expectations look anything like mine did.)

If you have any SGL experience whatsoever, it's probably safe to say that **you know what it's like to have a small group conversation totally bomb.**

Maybe you led a small group where your guys weren't exactly talkative. You tried to get the conversation moving, but you were met with . . .
the sound of crickets.
blank stares.
elbows to their neighbor who won't stop flicking their ear each time you look away.

Or maybe they were a little too talkative.

Maybe you had to scream the discussion questions at the top of your lungs while they . . .
fight to be the seventh person on a couch meant for three.
watch a viral YouTube video.
argue about whose team is better, which teacher is the meanest, and whose parents have the strictest rules.

Or maybe they were just the right amount of talkative, but you're convinced that your volunteer training didn't prepare you for the kinds of topics they wanted to talk about.

When leading a small group of teenage guys, sometimes you have to beg, convince, bribe, trick or plea for them to say something—*anything*.

Other times, you wish they would all instantly get laryngitis at the same time.

And more often than you'd like, you probably head home after a particularly challenging small group and wonder, "Did I say the right thing?
Were they even listening?
Do these conversations matter at all?"

If you've ever been there, you're not alone. Everyone who has ever led a small group of teenage guys has, at some point, wondered if they were completely wasting their time. (We don't exactly have the statistical data to support this claim, but we're pretty sure it's true.)

Especially on days when your group spends more time talking about the latest Air Jordans to hit the market than engaging in a conversation about faith, those questions are understandable.

But the next time a conversation goes completely off the rails and you're wondering if you're a terrible small group leader (or if leading a small group of teenage guys should be classified as a new form of torture), there are two things we hope you'll remember.

Here's the first:

Your small group conversations matter.

And we don't just mean those once-in-a-lifetime conversations where everyone everyone looks at the ground, pretending not to cry. We mean every small group conversation.

The one with way too many awkward silences? It mattered.
The one where you didn't get through a single discussion question? It mattered.

The one where your group wanted to know if God could make a mozzarella stick so hot that even He couldn't eat it? It mattered.

The one with more farts than words? It stunk, but it still mattered.

And the conversation you're about to lead this week? Yep. It's going to matter too.

The good news for SGLs like you and me is that the quality and effectiveness of the conversation you'll lead this week won't determine your ultimate success or failure as a small group leader. Sometimes a conversation will bomb, and that's okay because that one conversation isn't the only conversation you'll ever have with your few (by "your few", we mean your small group).

In the book *Lead Small*, we talked about the importance of showing up predictably—weekly, in fact—for your few. Actually, it's the very first thing we talked about. That's because showing up predictably, consistently, and regularly in the lives of the teenage guys you lead is the foundation of leading your small group (and of leading a small group conversation).

You may not even remember the conversations you had with your few that become so influential in their lives. I (Brett) led a group of middle school guys for three years. It was, like most middle school groups, a group of guys who were somewhat disrespectful and highly distracted. One random Wednesday night, I got an email from Andrew who was almost ready to graduate eighth grade. He thanked me for having a conversation with him way back in his sixth grade year about how God can be all loving in a very broken world. Immediately I assumed Andrew's email got hacked or his mom made him email me. But later I found out Andrew did this all on his own initiative. I didn't even remember that conversation we had in sixth grade. All I remember about Andrew that year was how he and his friends lit a sparkler in their cabin during the winter retreat and almost burned the place down.

When you show up predictably, you begin to understand that one conversation doesn't determine your success as a small group leader. Your success is actually determined by every small group conversation you've ever had, added up and then multiplied by factors we haven't yet identified. When you combine the dozens, or hundreds, or thousands of conversations you've had with your small group, they equal something pretty significant. They equal . . .

Relationships.

Trust.

Influence.

I (Shef) remember getting an invitation to a graduation party for one of my former middle school guys. It was nice to see I was invited as I hadn't really been in contact with him since he had gone to high school. His dad wasn't in the picture, so he lived with his sister and his mom. His mom knew how important it was for him to maintain quality relationships with Christian men as he grew up, and I was honored to be included in that group. I simply had to go. When I arrived I was happy to see his elementary SGL and his high school SGL. As I stood there with the SGLs from his life, I realized just how important our job was to this guy. He started as a name on a roster. We got to know each other through hours of hanging out over the years. Many of those hours could have seemed unimportant in the moment. But, it was clear on this day all of those hours counted.

I know there were weeks during this student's middle school years that I felt like our small group time was a flop. But I kept showing up, and so did my few, and this consistency created relationships that outweighed a week or two of less-than-dynamic conversations. If you walk out of group this week questioning if you said anything that mattered, relax.

Your small group conversations matter—even the ones that are difficult, frustrating, or the ones that don't exactly go according to plan. They matter because each of those weekly small group conversations are part of something bigger.

So next time a small group conversation doesn't *quite* meet your expectations, remember: **your small group conversations matter—maybe more than you think.**

But here's the second thing we hope you remember:

Your small group conversations can matter more.

In fact, that's what this book is all about—practical ideas and strategies to help you make the most of your conversations with your small group.

While the one conversation you lead this week will not determine your success as a small group leader, it will affect it. The influence you're building through your weekly conversations is important, but if you never actually use that influence to help your few build a more authentic faith, then you'll have missed it.

But you're not going to miss it. We know that because you're reading a book about how to make your small group conversations matter more, and that's a pretty good sign. You're already on your way to leading better conversations—conversations where the guys in your group will not only be able to engage, but will be able to . . .
be themselves.
share their doubts.
ask tough questions.
share their struggles.

It isn't always easy to lead those kinds of conversations, though. So if you've ever looked at your small group of teenage guys and wished you knew . . .
what to say
what not to say
what to ask
how to ask it
when to speak
when to listen
how to make them talk
how to make them stop talking
. . . then keep reading.

We don't know everything about leading conversations for teenage guys, but we've spent a lot of time leading small groups, leading small group leaders, and learning the art of group talk. And now we want to take the things we've

learned and share them with you. Things we hope will help you make the most of your limited opportunities to lead a conversation with your small group.

So remember.

Your small group conversations matter. They matter because, with every conversation you lead, you're building influence, trust, and a relationship with your few that has the potential to influence them for a lifetime.

But your small group conversations can matter more.
And here's how . . .



chapter
one
prepare

Prepare

Picture this.

It's Wednesday evening. You only got half as much work done as you planned. Your lunch meeting required you to talk so much, you couldn't eat your food. You're starving.

Then you remember that tonight is small group. So instead of heading home, you . . .

race to a drive thru,
scarf down a bacon cheeseburger,
drop by the house to let your dog out,
screech into the parking lot right on time,
greet Braydon, Brandon and Brendon as they walk in (and try to remember which is which),
and catch up with your few.

Before you know it, it's time to get started, all eyes are on you and you realize you have no idea what we're talking about tonight.

Ever been there? We sure have. Now, don't get us wrong. We love our small groups. We care about them. We're committed to them. We want to have great conversations together. But . . . well, we're not always as prepared for our conversations as we should be.

If we're honest, we've all had weeks like that. It happens. If you've been with your group for some time, they might not have even noticed how much you were winging it. But on your way home, you might have wondered, "What kind

of conversation could we have had if I'd been just a little more prepared?"

If you want to get serious about making your conversations with your few matter more (and we know you do), then we've got to talk about **preparation** because the first step in leading a better small group conversation is to . . .

PREPARE

We know. We know!

You're a volunteer. You don't get paid to lead a small group. You've inserted yourself into the turbulent lives of a few teenage guys, and you're going to get absolutely nothing in return, except maybe a free T-shirt and some sub-standard pizza. You're already giving a *ton* of your time by showing up and leading these conversations, and now we're suggesting you spend more time *preparing* for those conversations?

Well, yes. But it's simple. We promise!

There are three things you can do to prepare for your small group conversations each week. And you can do them all from your couch.

If you want to prepare for your small group conversation, READ your email (and not on your phone driving to group).

We know that email is outdated. (That's why we created the Lead Small app.*) That's what our small groups tell us anyway. But we're not teenage guys. We're grown ups. So, we should probably still be checking—and reading—our emails.

* Find out more at LeadSmall.org.

We don't mean those emails about buy-one-get-one jeans or free shipping this weekend. Those emails probably won't help you prepare for your small group (although you should probably bookmark them just in case).

We're talking about the weekly communication—via email, the Lead Small app, a Facebook group, or a carrier pigeon—from your student pastor.

We may not know your student pastor, but we're going to assume a few things about what they do every week. We're guessing your student pastor or youth director or coach . . .

cares about your small group conversation.

thinks about your small group conversation.

has a plan for your small group conversation.

sends you the plan for your small group conversation.

Hopefully, that communication from your student pastor tells you important information like **what they'll be teaching and what you'll be asking** when you get to small group each week.

Ring any bells?

No?

Then you probably need to update your contact information in the church database or check your Recently Deleted folder. Or very humbly ask someone for that info on how to download that app again and get connected to your church.

But if you've checked, and double checked, and are absolutely positive your student pastor doesn't communicate with you weekly, try not to be too hard on them. We're sure they really want you to succeed as a small group leader! So don't get mad. If your student pastor doesn't send you a weekly email, try this . . .

1. Open your email app.
2. Write a new message to your student pastor.

3. Say something like this:
Hey _____! You know what would be really awesome? I would love to get an email every week— maybe a few days in advance—that helps me get ready for my small group. My guys are crazy, and I think my small group conversations could be a lot better if I had a little time to **think about what we're teaching and read my small group questions** before I get to small group. What do you think? Thanks for everything you do. You're awesome!

Pretty simple, right?

And if your student pastor already sends you weekly updates, then your job is even easier:

1. Open your email, app, or window (for the carrier pigeon).
2. Read it.

If you already do this, way to go! You are a very prepared SGL. And hey, here's a thought: If you love getting those emails in advance, take a second to hit "Reply" to your student pastor's weekly email and say, "Thanks for sending this!" They'll love to hear their weekly emails aren't disappearing into inbox oblivion.

If you want this week's small group conversation to matter more, then you need to know what the small group conversation will be about—you know, *before* you walk in the door.

**Prepare for your small group conversation.
READ YOUR EMAIL.**

If you want to prepare for your small group conversation, REHEARSE what you'll say.

Have you ever had an **imaginary conversation**?

Sure you have. Maybe it was when you were . . .
getting ready for a first date or a first date in a long time.
preparing for a tough conversation with your boss.
thinking of a killer comeback to win that battle of the wits
at work.

Having imaginary conversations simply means mentally
rehearsing what you're going to say before you say it.
Imaginary conversations are helpful when you're preparing
for a date, and they're also helpful when you're preparing
for your not-so-imaginary small group conversations, too.

We're not saying you should memorize lines or write a
monologue for your small group conversation. In fact,
please don't. That's weird. **We're just saying that what
you say can probably be said better if you rehearse
what you're going to say (or not say) before you say it.**

Just like . . .

a teacher practices before taking on a classroom
of students

a pitcher warms up before his call from the bullpen

a professional musician practices before the big show

. . . you should **practice for your small
group conversation.**

As an SGL, having an imaginary conversation means trying
to anticipate how your small group conversation will go
before small group so you're less likely to be caught off-
guard during small group.

So how do you do that? Well, once you've read your email
from your student pastor, ask yourself a few questions
about **what they'll be teaching, like . . .**

- What do my guys know, think or feel about this topic?
- How does this topic relate to specific situations in their
lives right now?

- Could this topic raise any challenging questions or strong opinions?
- How will _____ respond or feel when we talk about this?

Next, take a look at your small group questions for the week, and ask yourself a few questions **about what you'll be discussing** like . . .

- Will these small group questions make sense to them?
- How are my guys going to answer these questions?
- Will they feel comfortable answering them honestly?
- Do I need to rephrase any of these questions for my group?
- Is there anyone in my group I need to connect with before we have this conversation?

See? It's simple, but it's so important!

When you have a weekly imaginary conversation with yourself, you'll be able to better . . .

clarify your thoughts.

refine your words.

anticipate their responses.

lead the conversation.

Remember, if you want this week's small group conversation to matter more, you want to think about how the conversation will go *before* the conversation begins.

**Prepare for your small group conversation.
REHEARSE WHAT YOU'LL SAY.**

If you want to prepare for your small group conversation, PACK a survival kit.

No, we don't mean bandages and disinfectant (although, with teenagers, that's actually not a bad idea).

We mean the kind of supplies that will help you rescue your small group conversation in the event of emergencies like . . .
out of control extroverts.
awkward silences.
irrelevant rabbit trails.
general chaos.



We'll talk about how to use these supplies later in this book. **Just look for this symbol.** For now, just trust us. You'll need:

- A stack of icebreaker questions
- A stress ball
- A deck of cards
- Candy
- A zipper lock bag
- Pens
- Paper

There might be other items that come to mind when it comes to your small group and what works for them. Great! Add those items to your survival kit and bring them with you (or leave them in your small group room) just in case you need a little bit of help.

Remember, if you want this week's small group conversation to matter more, you want to be ready for anything.

**Prepare for your small group conversation.
PACK A SURVIVAL KIT.**

If you want to prepare for your small group conversation, PRAY for your few.

If you're anything like us, praying for your small group is, unfortunately, sometimes more of an afterthought than a vital part of your weekly preparation. Some weeks, you

may only manage a hurried, well-intentioned plea to God on the way to small group. Other weeks, the only time you pray for your few is *during* your small group.

But no matter how many times you've prayed for your few in the last week, month, or year, we've discovered there are at least two reasons why praying for your small group should be an every week kind of thing.

Pray for your few because they need it. Being a teenage guy is tough. Besides school, sports, girl drama, breakups, parents, siblings, and everything else your small group is dealing with, every teenage guy is also wrestling with big questions about who they are, why they matter, what they believe and who they'll become. That's a lot for any teenager to manage. So as you prepare for your small group each week, don't forget to pray for your few. They need it.

(And when you pray for your few, don't hesitate to send them a text to let them know you were thinking about them. No matter how old you are, it's always nice to hear somebody's praying for you.)

But there's another reason you should pray for your few.

Pray for your few because you need it. When you pray for someone else, it's usually because you want God to do something for them. But what if, when God told us to pray for each other (which He did quite often), He had a second purpose in mind? What if He designed prayer in such a way that praying for someone else didn't just result in change for them? What if it changes *us*, too?

When we pray for someone else, we learn to . . .
consider their needs.
imagine their world.
feel their emotions.
understand their perspective.

One of the most helpful things you can do is pray for a kid (or parent or co-leader) you don't like that much. In other words, **when you pray for the teenagers you lead, you develop more compassion for them.** And as an SGL, you'll need that compassion when . . .

- the conversation gets awkward.
- when guys relentlessly keep picking on each other.
- they ask a tough question.
- confidentiality gets broken.

As you prepare for your small group this week, don't let prayer be an afterthought. Be intentional about it. Maybe that means you . . .

- pray for a few guys each day.
- write their names on your calendar.
- set reminders in your phone.

However you decide to remind yourself, make praying for your few a habit. Remember, if you want this week's small group conversation to matter more, you want to have a conversation with God *before* you have a conversation with your few.

Prepare for your small group conversation. PRAY FOR YOUR FEW.

So there you have it. Three ways to **prepare** for your small group conversation every week. We said it would be simple, right?

- Read your email.
- Rehearse what you'll say.
- Pray for your few.

And now that you're (mostly) prepared for your small group conversation, let's talk about how to lead that conversation.

QUIZ:

HOW WELL DO YOU PREPARE FOR YOUR SMALL GROUP?

Throughout this book you'll find a few quizzes we've created as self-evaluation tools. Circle your answers (or just think them), and at the end of this book, you'll be able to see which areas of group conversation you're stellar at as well as the areas where you might have a little room to grow.

Answer honestly, and have fun!

Did you get an email or other communication from your student pastor this week? Did you read it?

Yes No Um, I don't know.

Do you pray for your few regularly? You know, *besides the times your few ask tough theological questions?*

Yes No Define regularly.

Do you have a system for reminding yourself to pray for your few?

Yes No I don't need reminders. I'm amazing.

Do you usually know what your conversation is going to be about *before* you arrive?

Yes No Why ruin the surprise?

author bios

Author bios



JEREMY ZACH

Jeremy, or "JZ," spent 10 years as a paid, professional youth pastor in the local church. He received a BA in Communication Studies from University of Minnesota and my MDIV (Masters of Divinity) from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena. Jeremy is the father of two girls, Harlow and Aria, and two calico cats. A few things that he enjoys are hot, hot sauce, YouTube cat videos, and loud EDM music.

**TOM SHEFCHUNAS**

Tom Shefchunas, or “Shef” as most people call him, has worked with students for over 20 years. He has been a teacher, a coach, a high school principal, and a father. Before joining Orange as the Executive Director of Student Strategy, Tom was North Point Ministries’ Multi-Campus Director of Transit for 12 years. He has an undergraduate degree in Physics, and graduate degrees in both Educational Leadership and Biblical Studies. He and his wife, Julie, have three children.

**BRETT TALLEY**

Brett Talley is an XP3 Orange Specialist with Orange after 11 years in full time ministry. He’s been married to his amazing wife since 2004. They have three awesome and hilarious kids who constantly keep them busy and laughing. He loves baseball, golf, and makes amazing turkey melt sandwiches (if he has the time and ingredients, otherwise they’re just average). Connect with Brett on Twitter & Instagram @brettryantalley for pictures of the cutest kids in the world.



lead
small.

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LEADING A CONVERSATION WITH A SMALL GROUP OF TEENAGE GUYS ISN'T ALWAYS EASY

Sometimes they talk too much – way too much. Sometimes they don't talk enough.

And sometimes you're pretty sure your volunteer training didn't quite prepare you for the sort of things they'd like to talk about.

Actually, if you've been a small group leader for at least five minutes, you probably already know what it's like for a small group conversation to totally bomb.

So if you've ever looked at your small group of teenage guys and wished you knew what to say, what not to say, when to speak, when to listen, how to make them talk, how to make them stop talking then this book is for you.

The Art of Group Talk helps small group leaders like you have better conversations with teenage guys. Because, as a small group leader, you lead a conversation with teenage guys every single week. Conversations about their lives, their dreams, their friends, their imaginary friends, and their definitely-not friends.

And sometimes you even manage to lead conversations about faith.

This is a book to remind you that your small group conversations—even the ones that don't go exactly as planned—**really matter.**

But there are a few ways to make your conversations **matter even more.**

With personal insight and practical advice, Jeremy Zach and Tom Shefchunas will help you discover helpful tips and strategies for surviving leading conversations with your small group of teenage guys.



WWW.THINKORANGE.ORG

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