

SOLVING STUDENT PARTICIPATION PROBLEMS

INTRODUCTION

Our topic for coaches / mentors this session is concentrating on our weaknesses. We are going to try and help you with some of the weaknesses that you may have already discovered in your groups. I think most of you are leading *Basic Christian Life*. Even if you are leading another group, or later on when you will lead other small groups, you can still use some of these ideas.

I want to talk to you about different struggles some of the coaches were having when leading their groups.

I. ATTENDANCE

What do you do when there is a problem with attendance? There are different reasons as to why students do not come to class regularly, or why they are late:

A. The coach has not prepared properly

Your lesson is possibly not very interesting or not spiritually uplifting and motivating. Why do I pick that first? Because a good coach always looks at himself first: "What is there that I am not doing right?" Or, "What is there that I could improve and do better?"

B. Often the coach does not have real enthusiasm

He comes to class, sits down and says, "Which lesson are we doing today? Oh, that one." He lacks enthusiasm. He does not have a vision for the group or he lacks a personal goal for each of his students.



C. Many times a coach does not go 'the second mile'

The Bible says to go 'the second mile,' give your second coat, all of these things. How do I know whether you have gone 'the second mile' if I visit your group? If your students come to your group looking uninterested and they have to dust off their chair before they sit down. I know that you did not go the 'second mile.' If you had gone the second step, you would have made sure that everything was clean before your students came. If I look up and see that there is a lamp but not a light bulb, and the students are sitting in the dark, you have not gone the second mile. You did not do what the Bible tells you to do: to care for one another, to love one another, to help one another. If you have the mentality of, "It is only a small group," then people will lose enthusiasm, people lose interest.

In the fall time you should have flowers there every week. A month later the frost will be in there and they will all die anyway. So you might as well cut them off now and put them in a vase now and enjoy them for your lesson. Afterward you can share them with your host or a student.

D. How to Change Attendance Problems

Many times you are the one to change the attendance problems. Many of these things have to do with preparation on the part of the coach. There are some coaches who hardly ever have problems with students, and there are some coaches who always have problems with students. So what you need to do is...

1. Review the material to develop a new enthusiasm for it yourself.

From our questionnaire we learned how important it is to review the materials that we have for coaches. You have received good material. You will need to review all of that material—everything. All of the lectures you received. You need to review it all in the next three months. I do not need it. It is for you. You need it. You need to review the principles of being a good group leader and coach.

One of the things that most facilitators struggle with is spiritual pride. They think to themselves, “I already know that, I do not need to review that. I do not need to learn that. I already know that.” And they are not growing in knowledge and capabilities. This will create many problems in your group.

2. **Create a spiritual oasis.**

Do you know the concept of an oasis? When your students come to your class, what is there that reminds them of an oasis of life? “Oh it is so good to be here, I can forget my troubles, my difficulties. Now I can concentrate on my lesson.” You should have a written list of what you will do for the next four to eight weeks to make your room look especially attractive. It should be a place where students want to be. A place where they enjoy the fellowship and they are happy to be with you personally.

3. **Before the lesson end, give them a little taste, an appetizer, about the next week’s lesson.**

“I am so glad that all of you came tonight. I believe most of you had a good time. Now let me tell you a secret. Next week, our topic is ‘How not to have any problems in your life.’” Oh, everybody will come next week. The whole village will come next week. Everybody wants to learn how not to have any problems. Or you can find some other topic, whatever the next lesson is about. You give them an appetizer—a story, an illustration, a Bible verse—and then you look straight at the young man who is not very interested and say, “Ivan, isn’t that exciting, what we are going to do next week? I am counting on you to be here because I know you have some good ideas on that topic for us.”

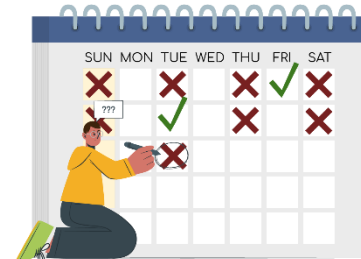
4. **Give a little special assignment to some of the students.**

Ask them to please prepare something at home for next week. During the week you will have to help them. You will have to phone them and ask, “How is it going?” Maybe you will have to visit them, “Can I help you with this a little bit?” Do not let them flounder on their own until the next lesson.

5. **Make a list of the students that are not attending regularly.**

6. **Pray for them every day by name.**

7. **Send them a little friendly note via Viber, Telegram or other .**



(Now you have to be a little careful, not to just send a love letter, if you are a young boy, not just to send a love letter to a girl.) But a little friendly letter, to tell them that you are praying for them every day. Instead of saying, “I love you. I am eighteen and you are seventeen, and I love you,” you may say, “Our group loves you, and they are asking about you. This week we studied this and this. It was a wonderful lesson, we learned a lot. Next week we are going to do this. I give you a special greeting with this Bible verse,” and you write a Bible verse there.

What do you do when you get a letter. “Oh, a letter! Oh what does it say?” You quickly want to read it. It is a personal message. Maybe you know their problem. Maybe they are too busy in the garden and you write “Well I hope that in two weeks” time, when the potatoes are harvested, that you can join us regularly.”

8. **Pay a personal visit.**

You should visit the home of each student quarterly. Or if you cannot do that, try it once in the fall and once in late winter. For a local leader this is a necessity. Focus on other people. What did Jesus say? He said, “Sit down and have them come to you???” No! He said, “You go to them.” What was he saying? You concentrate on **them**. Not, “Well, I am here. I wonder who is going to come tonight?” No. You serve **them**. And as you serve them, they will come back and learn spiritual things from you.

9. **Send a little gift with their neighbor.**

If their neighbor is there, somebody that lives on the same street or in the same town, they can take a little gift for you. I just met a Ukrainian businessman just this week. He put his hand in his pocket. He said, “Here,” and he gave everybody a candy or a chocolate. We were all grown up men, just standing there on the street, talking about some business. Oh, but it was nice. Perhaps I need to pay him a lot of money, but at least he gave me a little piece of chocolate.

10. Help students with their personal problems.

You help them over their problem. Maybe they are busy in their garden. You could easily go out to the gardens with some of your students and help them to do some of their work so that they are free tomorrow night to come to class. You phone one of your students, "We missed you last night." "Well I had to work in my garden," "Oh you did? I could visit you in your garden." So you organize a way that you can be with them in their garden. You show to them that you care.

11. Maybe you can help with transportation.

Several coaches, like Vadim, Victor and others, they have even paid some of the bus fare for their students when their students did not have money to come to the classes. They paid the bus ticket. You can do that. We mentioned paying for a ticket if necessary. Maybe you can ask somebody who has a car to go and pick them up, or take them home afterwards when it is dark.

I hope that those things will help you with your attendance.

II. MEMORIZATION

A. Use class time for memorizing

Maybe you have been going for four weeks and you begin to feel that it is getting slower and slower and slower. So you put a big board or piece of paper up on the wall, and you say, "Olga, you have beautiful hand writing. Will you come with a piece of chalk or a pencil and write this verse up here?" So because you said, "You have beautiful handwriting," she wants to do it. You create cooperation. Then once she has written the verse up, you say, "All right we are all going to say it together twice, and then we are going to erase parts of it." If it is a blackboard, you can just erase one word. And the whole class reads the rest and memorizes that word. Then you erase another word. If it is a piece of paper, you can simply fold up the bottom line. Or you can just cover up the part at the top. And the group memorizes this verse. And now during the week, all the students have to do is keep on repeating it. They have already learned it.



B. Give priority to memorizing

Many coaches do the lesson and say, "Oh, it is already time to quit. Oh, and we have not done our memory verse yet. Oh, did you do it?" And they show to the student that it is not important. It has the last place. No priority. In my lessons I try to give priority to memorization.

Now let us take another example. A coach has started his lesson. About the middle of his lesson, he sees that the students are getting tired. And he says, "All right, I think we will have a bit of a break. Let us have a glass of water for whoever wants a little drink, and here is some candy, and now we are going to see who knows their memory verse. Ok, I can see by your smile that you have no problem. Will you tell us your memory verse?"

C. Be bold to use memorization

Do not begin with the student whose body language says, "Oh no, I have not done it." Begin with the one that you think knows it and create a positive atmosphere. Then you do the next one. And you see on his face that he is thinking, "Oh, first him and then him, now it is going to be my turn. But I do not know it." And you say, "Well we have already heard from two men over here, now let us have a few more on this side of the group." So you skip over the person who does not know it. And in the meantime he has an opportunity to learn these verses a little bit as he listens. And then you say, "Oh, and let us see, can you repeat for us this verse?" and you pick the simplest verse for him. And the students see that, oh, you are not afraid of these verses. You are willing to give them priority. You are willing to talk about them.

If you are free about it, open about it, happy about it, they will accept it as normal. “This is what we do in our lesson.” Another good way is, do it yourself. Repeat the verse you have learned. You say, “Well, the first two I know real good, but the third one I am a little bit weak on, so when I stop, maybe you can help me a little bit.” And they understand that sometimes you also struggle with learning Bible verses.

D. Make memorization fun

I already mentioned playing some sort of a game. You can play other games. Each person can represent a word, for instance. He is ‘God.’ You are, ‘loves’. This person is ‘the’ and this person is ‘world.’ “God loves the world.” You mix them up and then have each of them find their proper place so that the verse can be read. If the verse is a little bit longer, it becomes more complicated. Perhaps each person can hold the word that he represents on a piece of paper. There are different things you can do. It shows the students that Scripture memory is important to you.

III. BAD PREPARATION

If your students are not preparing their lessons, they come to class unprepared and do not know what to talk about. So, what are you going to do about it? There are several different ways that you can work with people to show them first that preparation is a priority, and secondly to create a willingness in them to do it.

A. First of all, you need to make sure you have your things prepared.

Example is the most important.

B. Then you need to phone them individually.

Not all the time, but sometimes, and you say, “Yes, on page forty-five there are some difficult questions. I thought I would phone and see if you need any help with those questions. Oh ok, you have not come to page forty-five yet?” (He has not done anything yet. He has not done page 43 or 44 yet.) “Oh, no problem. Is it ok if I phone you back tomorrow night? Maybe you can look at these pages and then if you have a question, I will help you tomorrow night.” Try to help them personally with it.

C. Occasionally, if most of the group is having difficulty, walk them through the questions.

“I can see this week that everybody was struggling with their homework. I see only Vasily and Oleg have done theirs and the rest of you struggled with it. Sergei, look up this verse, please, and tell us what you think we should be writing down there.” Then he will tell you something, and if it is about right, then say, “Let us all write that down in our notebooks.” So if the whole group has been struggling, you can just walk them through their questions and show them how they can do that at home. “Lonya, was it difficult?” “No”. “Do you think that you can do that at home?” “Yes I think so.” “Ok, we have done three pages now tonight. How much time do you think that you need for doing this at home? You need one hour? Forty-five minutes?” “What about you? Is it a problem for you to try and do this at home this week? You would please me very much if you would do it at home.” “Are you willing to do it at home, David? Or will you not come next week if you have to do it at home?” You talk with them individually. You try to build a relationship.

An open and frank discussion brings about the reality of struggles all have. It raises the focus for the need to work on it harder, to give it priority. It makes it important for everybody.

D. Let them know your expectations.

Homework is their first priority. Let them know that if they do their homework, they are honoring you. Maybe at the end of the lesson you could say, “Well, we spent twenty minutes doing this homework and getting ready for it. Can we stay an extra twenty minutes this evening because we really could not do our lesson?” Ask them to stay longer. Then say, “All right, for next week, because we stayed extra long today, if all of

you do your homework, we will go home fifteen minutes early.” It is like doing business. You give me this and I will give you that.

E. Make sure that you are available for them.

Be available for them during the other days of the week. If they want to come to you, if they have questions, or if they need some help with the lesson, let them know that you are available for them.

Then when they come, be available — drop everything you are doing and help them.

F. Make sure that you are there thirty minutes early.

This is one of the most important things for you to do. Have the room nice. Have a bit of time for prayer. Your students know that they can come early if they could not do their homework, or if there was a problem. They can come to you and talk to you and you can help them before the class begins. A good coach is there and ready very much ahead of time.

G. Also make sure that your lesson is interesting.

Prepare well for it. For the leader it is better not to use the same book twice. If you taught last year, you should use a new book to lead this year. Make fresh new notes in it.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. Use an object

“I think I will begin with a couple of questions. Can you please cut this apple in nine equal pieces?” Now everybody in the group is concentrating. “All right. That is not important. But I do have a real question. Should people get married before they are twenty or not? What do you think?” So now you are going to get a discussion going. Why? Because you brought an object.

One time I was teaching a class, and I brought an object. I laid it in a special place, and everyone was looking. As time went by everyone was saying, “When is he going to talk about that?” I did not talk about it at all! After the lesson, the students asked, “Why did you lay this apple there on the cassette player?” I told them, “I wanted to have your attention.” They all thought it was so funny. But it worked, because I showed interest in them.

B. With a discussion never criticize whatever they are talking about

Never criticize their answer. When somebody gives you an answer that is totally wrong, you say, “Well, thank you. That is the first answer you have shared with us in a long time. I am very happy about that.” Or maybe that person says something every week, so you say, “Thank you. You share a lot with us. You know there have been other times when you had better answers than this time. But thank you anyway.” Do not criticize their answers. There are other ways to handle wrong answers.

C. If a student does not participate:

1. **If a person just does not participate, after class ask him privately,** “Is it ok, if I ask you a question next week? Is that okay? You do not mind if I ask you a question?” Maybe that will help him.
2. **Or sometimes you might say, “All right, we have already had three answers from these young men, and I think we need a couple of answers from you older men now.** We all know young men like to talk, but older men think very deeply. Andrew, what do you think about it?” You have just given

him priority by saying, "Well, young men talk a lot, and older men think deeply." If he gives a crazy answer, you say, "Thank you. We have not had that kind of idea at all yet." "Ok. We have heard from Andrew, now, Bill, can you give us another answer?" Draw the information out of people.

3. **If you have great difficulties, then maybe you can even have a discussion about a completely different topic than your lesson, just to get them started.** This shows them, "Oh, we can do it! It works and nobody got mad and we learned a lot." And you can get started that way. See lectures on "*Questions for New Groups*," and "*How to Lead a Small Group Discussion*."

So these are some things I think you can do to get a discussion going and make it interesting.

V. OUTSIDE QUESTIONS

Questions not relating to the lesson. We call them "rabbit trails." Going off on a "rabbit trail," away from the highway, and you end up in a completely different place than where you wanted to be. There are several things that you can do with that kind of problem. Here are a few ways you could respond:

- A. **Invite him** to ask these questions afterwards and you would be glad to talk with him individually.
- B. **Another way is**, "Oh that is a good question. You know, it is a shame that you did not ask this question last week when we were talking about that topic. This week we are on another topic, I do not think we can talk about this again in this lesson."
- C. **Sometimes you tell students**, "That is a wonderful question. Where did you get that from? Oh, out of chapter thirteen. But we are only doing chapter nine right now. Can the question wait until we do chapter thirteen and then you can ask us again?"
- D. **Or you can** invite them to write down their questions on a piece of paper, and after the lesson you study it together.
- E. **Or, if it is an important** issue, maybe another evening you go over to his house with two or three students and talk about it some more.
- F. **If the questions** are intelligent, they are usually from the same one or two people. You need to pay some extra attention to them. If it is the same person, you need to talk to him individually about it. Maybe he is too far advanced and is working ahead of time. Maybe you have an extra booklet you can give them to study at home that will help them.

Many times you need to give some sort of an answer like that, so that the group will stick with the main topic.

VI. LOW LEVEL OF EDUCATION

There are several options you can choose from:

- A. **What you probably need to do is, go a little bit slower. So you do a half a lesson a week.**
- B. **Another thing to do**, is write the most important questions out, and you give each student maybe two questions instead of the whole booklet. Instead of doing all the questions in the booklet, you just give two questions to one and two questions to another, and they do the homework that way and can share answers in class.
- C. **Sometimes the students respond better to a handwritten question than to studying a book at home.**

D. You could study a little bit longer together, and then write the answers together as a group in the book.

E. Or you may organize a system by which you meet three times in two weeks.

1. *During the first session, you explain everything. It is like a lecture.*

2. *During the second session you do the same material, but everybody in the group, writes in the same answers in the booklet. So first they heard a lecture. Now they have written it in their book.*

3. *And the third session they have a discussion. You are going to let them talk about it.*

It is a little bit more work, , but it produces spiritual fruit. It is not just a lecture, which they say was wonderful, and then go home and forget about it and do not remember it. They will have written it down in their booklet with this method, and maybe next year or two years from now they will sit down and read those things that they wrote down in their booklets.

I hope this will help some who struggle with low levels of education.

CONCLUSION

I believe we have discussed some of the main difficulties that we encounter:

- Attendance
- Memorization
- Bad Preparation
- Discussion
- Outside Questions and
- Low levels of Education.

If you prayerfully begin to practice these suggestions, I believe you will experience a reformation in your groups. The most important is how much you personally care about the success your students will experience.

What a way to go! On to success! May God honor your efforts. — Amen!

Blessings to you, our dear friends!