Techniques of Table Discussion

Objectives: To help a group to discuss a talk with a certain degree of order and intelligence by the use of different techniques.

Theory: Definition of discussion: Group deliberation carried on through oral discourse aiming at a cooperative consensus. (Note: definitions are always very wordy)

The Discussion—

Subject Matter –

A discussable subject must raise a recognizable opening remark.

The opening remark should be important and worth discussion.

The opening remark should lend itself to reflective thinking.

The opening remark should be suited to the group.

The opening remark should, ideally, involve more than two solutions.

The opening remark should be suited to the time limit.

Wording of the opening remark: The opening remark should be in the form of a question instead of a proposition.

Duties of the Team Members: (Success depends to a great degree on the ability of the team members to direct the discussion fruitfully.)

* To be ready to initiate discussion and be aware of the limitations for the present discussion.
* To give each member of the group an opportunity to contribute.
* To summarize the progress of the discussion occasionally.
* To resolve conflicts between members and their contributions.
* To state a tentative solutions at the end of the discussion.

Note: If candidate participation is good, you will not and should not have to do the above. Be relaxed, don’t rush the table discussion to arrive at what YOU feel are the right answers. The Cursillo lasts three days and each person will respond differently and at different times.

General Qualification of the Leader:

The team members’ personality:

* Ability to think and act quickly. The unexpected is always happening in discussions, and the leader may need to change his plans on the spur of the moment.
* Ability to get along with others. The discussion leader’s task is to get group members to think ‘out loud’ together. The team member often has the added problem of composing differences and dealing with personality clashes among candidates. These tasks are difficult enough when the leader is well liked and emotionally stable. If he is inclined to ‘fly off the handle’ he should not attempt to lead discussions on hot issues.
* Respect for the opinions of others. The leader must be a good listener genuinely interested in what others know and believe. Those who believe people should be told what to think and do are irritating enough as group members. Certainly they should not be leaders. Nor should the leader show impatience if the discussion moves slowly or the members prefer their own idea to his. If he shows he doesn’t like what they are doing, they will make it unanimous by not liking him.
* Willingness to remain in the background. The leader who cannot resist the temptation to parade his own knowledge or to point out the mistakes of others will not gain the group’s respect. This does not mean the leader should let others take control. He keeps attention focused on what others know and think about the topic. Instead of voicing opinions, he asks questions. Whenever possible he has the group decide matters, but he guides the progress none the less.
* Freedom from prejudice. It would be impossible to find a leader absolutely free from prejudice on the controversial issues considered in discussions. The practical question is whether the individual recognizes his own prejudices and is not judgmental of others who do not share the same attitude about such things. Consider for instance your views relative to the celebration of Mass celibacy, brotherhood, the Green Bay Packers, etc. Are your views the same as all other peoples?

The Leader’s Knowledge and Skills: The leader’s knowledge of the discussion process, his ability to analyze and reason, his skill in speaking and in asking questions, are important qualifications.

Knowledge of the discussion method. This is the most important qualification of the successful leader. He must know both the why and the how, the purpose and the procedure for the discussion he is to lead.

Knowledge of reasoning. The fact that discussion is as informal as conversation does not justify assertions without proof, or conclusion not based on evidence.

Knowledge of the topic. The leader should have a general knowledge of the topic, but he should represent the layman who raises question, not the authority who answers them. The team should learn as much as they can about the topic, but their main task is to help the group analyze it.

Skill in asking questions: The leader should be neutral about decisions made by the group, but he should be constantly concerned about the quality of the evidence and reasoning. He can best guard against hasty decisions based on poor evidence and faulty reasoning by asking questions instead of voicing his opinion. Questions such as those in the following list may also be useful in keeping attention focused on the discussion rather than on the leader, and in handling typical situations that arise with some frequency during the discussion.

To Call attention to a point that has not been considered

Has anyone thought about this phase of the problem?

To Question the strength of an argument

What reasons do we have for accepting this argument?

To Get back to causes

Why do you suppose Doakes takes this position?

To Question the source of information or argument

Who gathered these statistics that you spoke of? Who is Mr. Gish whose opinion has been quoted? Do you know that as a fact, or is it your opinion?

To Suggest that the discussion is wandering from the point

Can someone tell me what bearing this has on your problem? Your point is an interesting one, but can’t we be back to our subject?

To Suggest that no new information is being added

Can anyone add anything to the information already given on this point?

To Call attention to the difficulty or complexity of the problem

Aren’t we beginning to understand why our Bishops haven’t solved this problem?

To Register steps of agreement (or disagreement)

Am I correct in assuming that we all agree (or disagree) on this point?

To Bring the generalizing speaker down to earth

Can you give us a specific example on that point? Your general idea is good, but I wonder if we can’t make it more concrete. Does anyone know of a case ……?

To Handle the impatient, cure all member

But would your plan work in all cases? Who has an idea on that? Hadn’t we better reserve judgement until we know more about this problem?

To Suggest that personalities be avoided

I wonder what bearing this has on the question before us.

To Suggest the value of compromise

Do you suppose the best course of action lies somewhere between those two points of view?

To Suggest that the group may be prejudiced

Is our personal interest in this question causing us to overlook the interests of other groups?

To Draw the timid but informed member into the discussion

Spelvin, here, lived for quite a while in China, suppose we ask him whether he ever saw…

To Handle a question the leader can’t answer

I don’t know. Who does?

To Encourage a speaker to talk with the group, not at the leader

Don’t you think you’ll be heard better if you face the rest of the group?

To Cut off a speaker who is too long winded

While we’re on this point, let’s hear from some of the others. Can we save your other point until later?

To Take the play away from a verbose member

You’ve raised a number of interesting points which should keep us busy a good while… Would anyone else like to comment on them?

To Help the member who has difficulty expressing himself

I wonder if what you’re saying isn’t this… Doesn’t what you’ve said tie in with our subject something like this…

To Encourage further questions by friendly comment

That’s a good question. I’m glad you raised it. Anyone have an answer?

To Break up a heated argument

I think we all know how Jones and Smith feel about this. Now who else would like to get in on it?

In using questions to call attention to weaknesses in evidence or procedure, the leader must be careful to avoid statements that might indicate his own opinions on the questions under discussion. Even such comments as ‘I’m sure we all agree with John’s excellent analysis of the problem’ should be avoided.

Skill in speaking. A prospective discussion leader should not decline to serve because he is not an accomplished public speakers. But he should have some skill in clear and direct conversation. This means, among other things, short sentences, simple words, and the personal pronouns we use in talking with others. The leader should ask himself, ‘How can I make what I want to say clear to these people?’ This does not rule out unfamiliar terms, but it does mean that such terms should be explained in familiar words.

Notes on listening to talks

* Listen attentively
* Listen eagerly
* Take notes PROFUSELY
* Your attitude makes the difference

Notes on Listening during table discussions

* No criticizing
* Let ideas pop, don’t inhibit participants
* Hitch-hike on the ideas of others
* Look directly and intently at the person speaking
* Relax and enjoy

A Guide to asking Questions

DO

* Ask questions that call for more than ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers.
* Ask questions so that others are encourage to respond with ideas.
* Ask in a way which makes clear that you don’t think you have the answer.
* Relate questions to the purpose of the talk.
* Ask questions about feelings as well as information (How do you feel about that?)
* Focus questions on one point (who, what, when, how).
* Ask for concrete facts of what was said and done.

DON’T

* Ask threatening or motivational questions (Why do you think that?)
* Try to lead other to your answer.
* Lead the table to an unrelated topic.
* Ask purely theoretical questions (What is the meaning of …..).
* Ask what should have been done (No one knows).