



# the art of group talk

HOW TO LEAD  
BETTER CONVERSATIONS  
WITH **TEENAGE GUYS**

SAMPLE

JEREMY ZACH  
TOM SHEFCHUNAS

We hope you enjoy this complimentary sample of *The Art of Group Talk: How to Lead Better Conversations with Teenage Guys*, by Jeremy Zach and Tom Shefchunas.

This sample contains the introduction, a portion of the first chapter, and other details about the book.

This book is part of a series of books for leading better conversations (with kids, teenage girls, and teenage guys). It is available at [OrangeStore.org](http://OrangeStore.org) and Amazon.

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# 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

The Art of Group Talk: Teen Guys

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# Foreword

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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, figuring out how to lead a conversation with a group of teenage guys isn't always obvious. It's definitely not like leading a conversation with a group of adults.

I (Jeremy) learned this the hard way. When I signed up to be an SGL, I had some pretty big expectations for how those weekly small group conversations would go down. At the time, I thought leading a small group of teenage guys would be pretty much like leading a conversation with a bunch of me's—but smaller. And louder. And smellier.

Before I became an SGL, I expected to lead small group conversations where every guy . . .  
paid attention.  
participated.  
asked deep theological questions.  
and simultaneously decided to give their lives to Jesus, devote themselves to full-time ministry, and read the Bible every day.

^ attempted to lead  
But then I (Jeremy) ~~led~~ my first small group of middle school guys and, well, you can guess how that went.

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

If you have any SGL experience whatsoever, and 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.  
the backs of their phones as they tried a new Snapchat filter.

Or maybe they were a little too talkative.  
Maybe you were forced to scream the discussion questions at the top of your lungs while they . . .  
discussed that weekend's football game.  
watched an Instagram video.  
asked you to participate in a game that ends in arm punches.

Or maybe they were just the right amount of talkative, but you're convinced 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 them to say something—*anything*.

Other times, you wish they would lose the ability to speak altogether.

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 data to support this claim, but we're pretty sure it's true.)

Especially on days when your group spends more time one-upping each other and discussing their favorite musical artists 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 left wondering if you're a terrible small group leader—or if you think 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 hides their tears, bro-

hugs, and gets saved (again). 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 even He couldn't eat it? It 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.

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).

When you show up predictably, you begin to understand that *one* conversation doesn't determine your success as a small group leader. Instead, you realize that 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. Because 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 . . .

\* If "thousands of conversations" seems far-fetched, your small group has clearly not discovered group texting

Relationships.

Trust.

Influence.

So, you see, your small group conversations matter—even those conversations that are difficult or frustrating, or that don't *exactly* go according to plan. They matter because each of those weekly small group conversations are part of something bigger.

Ten years from now, the guys in your small group will probably not remember much of what was said during your small group conversations. But they will remember how those consistent, weekly conversations resulted in relationships that made an impact on their lives. That's the power of showing up consistently.

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 out 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 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, talking to other small group leaders, and learning how to lead small groups better. And now we want to take the things we've learned and share them with you. Things that, 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 . . .

# 1

chapter  
one  
**prepare**

# Prepare

---

Picture this.

You just got out of work. It's been a long day. Someone yelled at you. And you're starving. Plus, you spilled coffee on your shirt this morning and you've been trying to hide it by pretending to scratch the exact same spot on your neck for the last six hours.

But the day is finally over!

You head to your car and realize there's a new episode of your favorite podcast. (Win!) When you get home, you're going to change into sweats, make some dinner, and catch up on the latest game. All's right with the—

WAIT.

What day is it?

Shoot.

You have to lead a small group in an hour.

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.

Maybe you can relate. Maybe you know what it's like

to fly through the church doors, desperately searching your phone for the email from your student pastor about what in the world you're supposed to talk about in small groups this week. During the message, you tried to skim through the discussion questions, but you found it hard to concentrate with your student pastor talking so much. Then when you got to small group, you realized you didn't really hear much of the message and you couldn't *exactly* remember all the small group questions, so you read them from your phone and just hoped for the best.

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 tumultuous 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 should spend time *preparing* for those conversations, too?

Well, yes.

But it's simple. We promise!

There are four 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.**

We know that email is outdated. That's what our small groups tell us anyway. But we're not teenage guys. We're grown ups. And since we're grown ups, we should probably still be checking—and reading—our emails.

We don't mean those forwarded emails your mom keeps sending over and over. Those emails probably won't help you prepare for your small group.

We're talking about emails 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, youth director, or coach . . . **cares** about your small group conversation. **thinks** about your small group conversation. **has a plan** for your small group conversation. **emails you the plan** for your small group conversation.

Hopefully, that email 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.

But if you've checked, and double checked, and are absolutely positive your student pastor doesn't send you a weekly email, 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. 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?

Pretty simple, right?

And if your student pastor already sends you a weekly email, your job is even easier:

1. Open their email.
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!" 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, 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.  
preparing for a tough conversation with a friend.  
thinking of some killer comebacks for that troll on Facebook.

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 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. 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 surgeon practices before a procedure  
a lawyer practices for a trial  
a pilot practices in a flight simulator  
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'll be 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?

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 confetti popper
- A stack of icebreaker questions
- A noisemaker
- A stress ball
- A deck of cards
- A zipper lock bag
- Pens
- Paper

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 hard. Like, really hard. Besides school, sports, drama, breakups, gossip, and everything else your small group is dealing with this week, 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.

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.

In other words, **when you pray for your the teenagers you lead, you develop more compassion for them.** And as an SGL, you'll need that compassion when . . .  
the conversation bombs.  
someone rolls their eyes.  
they ask a tough question.  
confidentiality gets broken.

As you prepare for your small group, don't let prayer be an afterthought. Make it 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. Four 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.  
Pack a survival kit.  
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 that we've created as self-evaluation tools. Write in 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 you might have a little room to grow in.

Answer honestly and have fun!

**Did you get an e-mail from your student pastor this week? Did you read it?**



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**author  
bios**

# Author bios



## JEREMY ZACH

Jeremy, or “JZ,” spent 9 years as a paid, professional youth pastor in the local church. He received my BA in Communication Studies from University of Minnesota and my MDIV (Masters of Divinity) from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena. Now Jeremy is a XP3 OS and gets to spend most of his days connecting and resourcing student pastors all around the country. Jeremy has been married to Mikaela for 8 years and he has 2 daughters and 2 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. Currently, Shef is the North Point Ministries Multi-Campus Director of Middle School for North Point Ministries. His passions involve working with, recruiting, and developing the hundreds of volunteer small group leaders it takes to pull off Transit (North Point Ministries’ middle school environments). Shef and his wife Julie live in Cumming, Georgia with their three kids. Shef also loves developing leaders outside of North Point and can be reached at [www.Coachshef.com](http://www.Coachshef.com).



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+  
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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.

The art of group talk  
TEENAGE GUYS  
ZACH & SHEFCHUNAS

