

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT BEHAVIORS

Whether you are working with large or small groups of people or something in the middle, you won't be able to control everything that happens. People may misunderstand, misrepresent, obstruct and disrupt without even necessarily intending to do so.

Taking care to set up a facilitation for success. Developing rapport as you are able, clearly defining the process and roles and modeling and facilitating helpful communication skills will all contribute to reducing the number of problems you encounter.

The first thing to remember is to accept that you cannot control everything. Don't take challenges to the process as a personal attack. Learn to step out of the way of attacks and redirect the communication to something more productive.

Don't assume that all people exhibiting difficult behaviors are alike. Some are truly weird, but most:

- Just want attention and recognition and to be heard
- Might be feeling too emotionally charged to monitor their own participation
- Want a specific outcome and will fight to get it
- Don't know or don't have a more constructive way to participate
- Think they are just being helpful

Without using up too much time, try to figure out what is underneath the behavior. Use simple constructive techniques to stop the behavior and invite more positive participation. Focus on the future.

Example Language: "Let me see if I understand what you are saying..." "I hear that you really value or need..." "What would you most like the other person to understand?" "What would you like to see happen in the future?" "Where do you want to go from here?" Etc.

If they need attention or to be heard: People who don't feel heard tend to repeat themselves over and over again and get loud. It does not cost you anything to listen to them closely and to give them recognition and invite their positive participation. You can also slow the process down further by having the other party reflect back what was just said, and ask the speaker if they got it right, or if they need to try again.

If they are too emotionally charged: You can take a break or try to manage the climate in the room. Normalize. Acknowledge the feelings and energy in the room. Ask the person what they need right now to be able to participate in the process. Slow down the communication and use simple and calm language. Balance air time.

If they are fighters for an outcome: Acknowledge their investment and the level of importance that this issue has for them. Invite them into the process. Ask them where this might fit into the agenda.

If they don't know how to contribute effectively: Untrained participants can be educated to become good participants, much more easily than they can be suppressed. Participants need to be informed and understand the process. This might take repetition.

If they think they are being helpful: These people are willing to try, not problems at all! With guidance they can be taught how to contribute productively.

Escalate your interventions very deliberately and slowly from lowest level to higher level as needed.

Lower level: May choose to ignore behavior if it is not negatively impacting or derailing the meeting
 Actively listen and acknowledge
 Reframe, surface interests
 Educate, redirect, involve and engage
 Orient the person to where we are in the process
 Acknowledge and ask for a change in behavior during caucus or in open session

Higher level: Refer to the ground rules
 End the meeting

Adapted from Mediating and Facilitating Public Disputes Program for Community Problem Solving, 1992

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT BEHAVIORS

Behavior	Say/Do
Attacker	Intervene. Stop the interaction. Acknowledge out loud the person's strong feelings and ask if they could share it in a way that others can hear it. Intervene with increasing firmness if behavior continues. Describe the impact when someone feels attacked. Notice out loud people's body language in reaction to feeling attacked. Remind person about the ground rules and request a behavior change.
Two Fighters	Ask them to direct their comments to you. Acknowledge the strength of conviction/feelings about the subject for both of them. Have parties focus on their interests and needs. "What do each of you need to have happen to be able to move forward from here?" "What can each of you do to solve the problem?"
Exploder	Interrupt. Stand up. Make eye contact. Respond in a low calm neutral voice. Acknowledge feelings and surface interests. May suggest a break and talk in private with the person. "It seems like you are really frustrated with the situation and need to be heard. Can you tell me what your greatest concern is, or what you most need the other party to understand?" See under "attacker".
Negative Body Language	Name what you are observing without judgement. "Jo, I see you rolling your eyes/shaking your head vigorously. It appears that you don't agree. Can you tell us what is going on for you?"
Talker	Be sure person is acknowledged and listened to thoroughly once. Interrupt and say, "Let me see if I understand what you are saying.... Does that capture your thoughts? Is there something we have not yet heard?" Remind re ground rules, equal air time, etc.
Interrupter	Use body language. Acknowledge their need to have input. Ask them to write down their thoughts so they don't forget them when it is their turn to talk. Remind them re ground rules. "Erin, Max wasn't finished. Max, please continue. Now, Erin...."
Interpreter	"Hold on Sam, let's let Gerry use his/her own language and speak for himself/herself..."
Clam	Ask point blank for their input. Be attentive to pause length. Notice silence out loud and ask the person how you should interpret it. Make sure they know that you want them to be heard if they want to be heard. Caucus.
Doubting Thomas	Interrupt consistently negative behavior. Acknowledge sincere feelings of hopelessness, being overwhelmed or stuck. Redirect toward generating new ideas. "What do you think <u>would</u> work?" "What would you suggest that would solve the problem?"

CHALLENGES FOR THE FACILITATOR (AKA...WORST FEARS)

Problem

Not being accepted

Say/Do

- Be sure each person/subgroup agrees to facilitation beforehand
- Get proper introduction
- Ask group what concern is and problem solve
- Ask group to give you a try for one hour and then re-evaluate
- Ultimately you can remove yourself

You offend someone

- Apologize
- Ask what you can do differently
- Check it out with whole group
- Ultimately you can remove yourself

Can't keep group on track

- Report out problem to group
- Remind group of ground rules
- Keep refocusing discussion
- Confront - "How does this relate to your topic?"

Can't finish agenda - not enough time allotted

- Forgive yourself
- Ask group to re-prioritize time
- Manage group expectations - "This is more than any group could do...let's look at what's reasonable..."
- Get group to re-commit to time frame agreed upon

Can't reach consensus

- Forgive yourself - it's often not possible or appropriate
- Ask group why not: Need more info? Too much hostility? Not right time? Something else? Is another method appropriate?

Looking inept and foolish

- So you're human - forgive yourself
- Admit your confusion and ask for help
- It's their meeting and they need to take responsibility for its success
- Suggest a change of pace
- Do your preplanning: Anticipate trouble and possible coping strategies

Losing your neutrality

- Recognize it as soon as you are able
- Evaluate whether or not you can continue and act impartially
- Step out of role publicly, until you can take it back
- Ask for help – ask them to remind you about neutrality if you get caught up in their 'stuff'
- Excuse and replace yourself with someone better able to act impartially

Hidden agendas

- "I wonder if we've all put our cards on the table. Let's go around the table again and..."
- "Are there any more comments?"
- "You seem to have some hesitancy – did you have something else in mind?"
- Do an open gripe session
- Be sure interests are being satisfied
- Notice out loud if there is an elephant in the room

You need to cut off a person in authority

- Get agreement ahead of time to your facilitative role including the right to interrupt or intervene to keep them on track
- Use all of your communication skills to remain even-handed and fair to all participants
- Visualize beforehand what you would say and practice it
- Allow the person to save face.

Remember

- Do your homework at intake and many of these problems won't happen later
- Be sure to go over roles and rules and re-contract with group at every meeting
- It's often best to report out what's going on and to suggest a process solution – you're modeling honesty and congruence, that rare and important ability to sense what's not being said and to confront the group with it gently
- Don't forget it's their group, it's their problem and it's their solution - you just supply a process that ultimately the group needs own too
- And again, if all else fails, withdraw from the role – in so doing you preserve your integrity and the integrity of the process.