

Dealing with Difficult Behaviors and Situations

Every facilitator cringes at the thought of having to deal with a particularly difficult participant or group behavior. While leading a group, it is your responsibility to ensure the group process does not become inhibited. Choosing not to deal with problem situations is not an option. An effective facilitator learns how to prevent, discourage, and eliminate behaviors that hinder effective group functioning. The welfare of the group must be your top priority.

Some typical "difficult" behaviors that participants demonstrate in meetings include:

- Making negative or cynical comments
- Arriving late or returning late from breaks
- Leaving before the meeting is over
- Repeating a point of view or objection over and over
- Doing other work, e.g., texting, e-mailing, or meeting with another participant on another task during the session
- Demonstrating exaggerated, negative nonverbal signals
- Conducting conversations on the side
- Speaking excessively or speechmaking
- Sidetracking discussions or changing topics
- Verbally attacking or challenging the facilitator or other participants
- Acting as a self-appointed expert or "know it all"
- Intentionally misinterpreting the facilitator or other participants' views or positions
- Not participating
- Working hidden agendas

The Leader's Role: Dealing with Group Problems

General Strategies

- Use preventive strategies whenever possible. Examples:
 - Set ground rules in advance
 - Use round-robin discussion processes
 - Agree on a process to resolve conflicts or make decisions
- Consider every problem a group problem. What does the group do to allow or even encourage the behavior? What could the group do differently to change this? Is there a hidden benefit to the group in this behavior?
- Respond appropriately to the seriousness of the problem. Let small disruptions go, and keep a range of options available if the problem becomes more serious:
 1. **Do nothing.** Sometimes other group members may deal with it, and sometimes ignoring inappropriate behavior is the best response.
 2. **One-on-one conversation outside the group.** Ask the person about their concerns and give constructive feedback.
 3. **General group problem-solving.** Without singling out individuals, discuss process concerns. Talk about how the group can help to assure appropriate behavior.
 4. **Confront outside of group.** After other attempts have failed and the behavior continues to happen, give feedback about the behavior and its consequences. Explore options and ask the person to agree to make a change. Offer your assistance.
 5. **Group confrontation.** This is a high-risk strategy, useful only when everything else has failed. The purpose is to change the behavior, not punish the person. You must be well-prepared to keep the discussion on a positive footing. Make sure that people use constructive feedback guidelines, "I" statements, and behavior descriptions.

Do not expel a member from the group. The bad feelings from "kicking someone out" remain with the group and the individual for a long time. If an individual decides not to attend meetings, see if there is another way for the person to make contribution to the group task.

Understanding and Dealing with Problem Behaviors

If ground rules are clear and followed, problem behavior should be minimized. But the group wants you take care of tough members. Don't let them down.

1. **Silent Members:** Could be an introvert. Did you give him or her enough information during the meeting to allow reflection? Be cautious, but try asking, "Joe, what are your thoughts on this question?"
2. **Challengers:** Consistently challenges the presenter's ideas and opinions. Acknowledge that the Challenger's ideas or opinion have merit and say, "I will need to think about the effect that has on my thinking," or ask the group what they think about the idea/opinion expressed.
3. **Out in Left Field:** May be confused or misinformed. Be patient. Ask open-ended questions, listen and rephrase. Compliment their asking questions. Get others to help you understand.
4. **Complainers:** Defer to the group. Ask, "How are other people feeling about this?"
5. **Dominators:** Talks often. Ask the rest of the group, "What does anyone else think about this point?" or "Who else has some ideas?" and then redirect your body language in another direction.
6. **Long-Winded Members:** Talks long. Wait a minute for a pause, however brief, and interrupt, saying, "Could you summarize your idea in a few words so I can write it down?" Celebrate diversity.
7. **Side Conversations.** Talks to someone else at length. If possible, you can move to where they are. Try, "What are your thoughts on the point just raised?" or "Are we missing out on something important?"
8. **Side-Trackers:** Brings up issues that appear not to relate. Try, "I'm not clear how that fits in with what we are discussing. Can you help me?" Get others to help you understand. The Side Tracker's issues can be placed in a "Parking Lot."

One-on-One Behavioral Interventions

It is always preferable to take preventive action in groups to establish a positive working environment. Preventive steps include having the group establish ground rules and "round robin" idea-sharing processes which systematically include everyone.

However, at times it is necessary for a facilitator to intervene with a group member who continues to engage in disruptive behavior despite preventive efforts. When you must do so, here are some guidelines:

1. Seek a private location, not in front of the group.
2. Use constructive confrontation techniques.
 - **Ask permission to give feedback.** *"I'd like to share some perceptions about how you're coming across in our team. Is that OK with you?"*
 - **Give the person the benefit of the doubt.** *"You are probably not aware of this..."*
 - **Describe the specifics of the behavior. Stay away from discussions of attitude or motives. These are always subjective.** *"I have noticed that you have criticized others' ideas when we are brainstorming. For example..."*
 - **Describe the problem it creates for the group, again in behavior terms.** *"Criticizing ideas seems to put a barrier up to the groups' creativity. Few ideas were shared after you criticized the first one."*
 - **Request a concrete change.** *"I would like you to hold off on any criticisms of others' ideas until we get to the evaluation stage."*
 - **Ask for agreement.** *"Is this something that you are willing to do?"*

3. Follow up on the situation.

- **Reinforce any positive change.** *“At the last meeting, I noticed you really followed through on not criticizing others. That’s great – I think it really had a positive influence on the group.”*
- **If negative behavior persists: Confront again.** *“I’m concerned. We discussed this before and I thought we had an agreement.”*
- **Agree on further steps.** **If the person seems unaware of the behavior, perhaps there is a signal or cue you could agree on to alert them when the behavior is occurring.**

4. Consider third party assistance. Sometimes a group that is experiencing difficulties can benefit from a neutral observer or facilitator to provide feedback and suggest changes. When an individual continues to exhibit behaviors that impede progress or stir conflict, ask for help and advice from a manager or specialist in team and organization development.

Probing Questions to Clarify Participants' (Invisible) Thinking:

What to do:	What to say:
Gently ask about others conclusions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What leads you to conclude that? - What causes you to say that?
Use non-aggressive language. Avoid provoking defensiveness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you mean? - Can you help me understand your thinking here?
Find out as much as you can about why others said what they said.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is your reason for thinking that?
Ask for examples.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How would your idea affect... - Can you give me a typical example?
Test understanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Am I correct that you're saying... - Can I check to make sure we're all understanding this the same way?