

Composition of Groups

Expect a wide range of adult behaviors in every group. Good leaders know how to share their knowledge and direct the work of a group while respecting that all members also have valuable knowledge and experiences to contribute. Managing challenging behaviors means maintaining your cool which is the capacity to calculate and choose wisely under pressure. Challenging behaviors may intimidate a leader and provoke impulsive responses rather than reasoned choices. Encountering difficult people is inevitable. Do not take their behaviors personally. It comes with the job of being a leader.

Expressions of Protest



Withdrawal

These participants refuse to participate both verbally and non-verbally. They seem to be saying, "You can't reach me."



Diversion

These participants seem to want to initiate their own social interaction apart from that which you are orchestrating for the larger group. Their attitude is "If we can secede from your control, we can encourage others to do likewise."



Confrontation

These participants directly challenge your authority, oppose your directions, or criticize your message. Their posture is "If we refuse to go along with you, our rejection will undermine your confidence and destroy your poise as a leader."

Why is it important to manage difficult participants in meetings?

Expressions of protest are dysfunctional to a group. Dysfunctional participants will corrupt functioning group members. Such behavior may also intimidate a leader and may trigger fear. When fear arises, it can undermine a leader's:

- Confidence
- Concentration
- Momentum



Techniques for Dealing with All Participants

Positive reinforcement is the single most effective tool in motivating people. It needs to be practiced and shared equally among all participants. Positive reinforcement comes in two forms: verbal and nonverbal. Be specific and sincere. Being too general may appear artificial or phony. Focus on strengths and successes (even small ones). Try:



- Smiling
- Nodding
- Making eye contact
- Listening carefully
- Touching on an arm
- Saying "Thank you"
- Dealing with special needs individually
- Letting a participant make a decision
- Asking a participant a question
- Asking a participant to take the lead
- Making an enthusiastic and encouraging comment concerning a person's work

Techniques to Use at the First Sign of Challenge

- Physically move closer to the participant
- Make direct eye contact
- Calmly solicit information about their concern
- Dialog in a positive and supportive way



Techniques for Managing Difficult People

AVOIDING requires minimal energy from the leader. Ignore the behavior. Avoid direct contact. Allow peer pressure to shut the participant down. Interpret the intent of the behavior, and then respond if appropriate. For example, if someone acts distracted, announce a break.

ACCEPTING requires cooperation. Give the participant enough latitude to express his feelings and increase his sense of ownership in the group's work. For example, accepting that someone has a legitimate problem helps him focus on the group's task.

ADAPTING is often the most productive. Work with the participant and use her resisting force for your own purpose. When she disagrees with you, switch sides and say, "You are right. Good point!" It will eliminate her argument and defuse her resistance. After you regain control of the group, move the agenda back in the direction you were originally heading. For example, if a participant thinks a plan will not work, start a list of concerns on newsprint.

STANDING FAST is a simple but energy-expensive strategy. Do not give way, discuss or negotiate the point. Let the participant's resistance wash over you and wear itself out, and then proceed as you intended. For example, continue to explain your position when one person tries to dissuade the group.

PUSHING BACK is the most energy-costly and risky response. By challenging a dysfunctional participant, a leader is hoping the person will back off. If he doesn't, you create a no-win situation. If the leader wins, other members of the group will side with the defeated participant. If the leader loses, participants will have less respect for the leader's authority. For example, you are asking for trouble if you tell someone with a personal agenda that you have no intention of dealing with her concerns.

Ready Responses

- You know a lot about this topic. Thank you for sharing this with us.
- I must not have made myself clear earlier. Let me try again with a different example.
- We haven't gotten that far yet.
- I hear several questions. Let me try to deal with them one at a time.
- Will you see me after the meeting? I would like to talk with you further.
- May I re-phrase that question? Are you asking ...?
- Let me tell you who to talk to about that.
- Lots of people share that point of view.
- Thank you for asking.
- That is an interesting dilemma.
- What solution are you looking for?
- No, I am not familiar with that work. I would enjoy hearing more at the break.
- We are working on that issue. As you point out, it is complex with no easy answers.
- Your concern may not be of interest to the whole group. May I talk with you individually?
- Thank you. Next question, please.



Barbs lose their sting when met with a grin.

Managing Difficult People in Meetings



Describe one behavior you find particularly counterproductive.



Is this behavior Withdrawal Diversion or Confrontation?



Which technique for managing difficult people will you try?



Which Ready Responses might help in this situation?

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