How to deal with difficult meeting or training participants

There is a wide range of behaviours that even the most experienced meeting chairs, facilitators and trainers find difficult to deal with. Using an assertive communication style together with some specific techniques will help you to deal with most difficult people effectively – and the better you become, the fewer opportunities for disruption present themselves.

Agree groundrules

If you can, invest a few minutes at the start of every session to agree and/or reiterate some groundrules that everyone is happy to abide by. That way, you get the added benefit of peer pressure and personal accountability which will help to curb some of the most common types of difficult behaviour - such as people talking over each other, interrupting or talking amongst themselves.

Improve the environment

It may be that part of the problem is with the venue - if it is too hot or too cold, people will become distracted and fidgety, and will lose concentration. If there are strong opinions and emotions are running high, this will only be exacerbated by a room that’s too hot. The best temperature to aim for is just on the cool side of comfortable which will keep the majority of people alert. Equally, getting the seating right will encouraging effective communication. If there are individuals who are dominating, or who are getting into one-on-one disagreements, try asking people to swop seats and/or to work in different small groups, as this will change the dynamics.

Agree a purpose

Every meeting or training session requires an objective. Explain at the beginning why a meeting or a training session is the best way of achieving the outcome, and give an idea of how you will work with the group to achieve it. Aim to get group consensus on priorities for the session, or seek their commitment to pre-defined objectives. This will help you to identify and agree a common focus and direction, which you can refer back to if anyone goes off-topic, or loses sight of the overall purpose.
Use an agenda

This can serve as an effective means of keeping the meeting/session on course, and encouraging people to work within a time-frame and stick to the point. Circulating the agenda beforehand will help people to prepare and to think through their contributions or questions. Plan the structure of the meeting or training session by prioritising topics/agenda points so the most important/urgent are dealt with when people are most alert and motivated.

Never humiliate a difficult participant

Try to think of every participant as a ‘customer’, who deserves to be treated with respect. Also remember that the other people in the meeting/training session are likely to feel some sympathy for them, so you may find yourself alienated by the group if you behave in any way other than entirely respectful.

Don’t get into an argument

Although having a one-on-one tussle with an individual may entertain the others in the room, you run the risk of embarrassing them too. If you lose the argument or become too adversarial, you could also lose your credibility. Should the argument go on, the other participants are likely to become bored and irritated. Try to remain positive – don’t get pulled into a negative defence spiral. Instead focus on finding out more about their views by asking probing questions.

Don’t ignore them

The problem won’t usually go away on its own. Most difficult behaviour is exhibited as a result of an individual wanting to be heard or acknowledged. They are likely to ramp up the volume on their difficult behaviour unless and until it is/they are dealt with.

Try to understand them

If you can identify why they are being disruptive or difficult, you are more likely to be able to respond accordingly: If they want to be involved, give them a role such as making notes; if they feel they're not being listened to, use active listening techniques to give them a fair hearing; if they’re clashing with you, ask the other participants to comment on some of the specific points they're making - that way you’ll open up the discussion to everyone.

Never lose your cool

If you feel that you are going to lose your temper or to show your frustration, try counting to ten and/or taking a break as soon as it is appropriate - so you can re-gather your thoughts and work out an effective strategy for dealing with them calmly.
Talk to them alone

Try finding an opportune moment, say at lunchtime or during a coffee break. Ask them politely whether there's anything specific that is troubling them that you can help with. Even the most obnoxious person will usually talk reasonably given the opportunity for a private chat.

They may not mean to be difficult

Remember that people express themselves and their feelings differently, and learn and process information at different rates – sometimes it is easy to think that someone is being deliberately obtuse or pedantic just to be difficult, when in fact they are just in their natural style!

People have a right to their opinions

If you ask for feedback or for views and an individual seems to be hyper-critical or negative, accept their right to do so. If you can, turn it into a conversation rather than an argument. "What specifically do you disagree with?" "I'm interested to know why you think that" "What needs to happen/change for you to agree?"

If all else fails…

Consider encouraging them to leave – If you believe that the person is going to undermine the outcome of the meeting/session, or to reduce other participants' opportunities to contribute or to learn, then this is always an option - it is unlikely that they are achieving anything positive by being there and continuing with their disruptive behaviour.

Would you or others in your team benefit from training in meeting, facilitation or training skills?

We hope that you'll find these tips useful. However, most people derive huge additional benefit from the interaction, practical exercises and valuable feedback that face-to-face training gives. H2 offers bespoke training in training, meeting and facilitation skills from just £66 + VAT per person per day

Here's what some satisfied customers said after attending our "Chairing Effective Meetings" and "Training for Trainers" courses:

- "Thanks so much, I was dreading chairing my first meeting, but I'm now feeling very positive about taking a confident role."
- "A very productive day... I have come away with lots of ideas for making our meetings far more lively and interesting, and for making sure that everyone gets their say."
- "I have even more admiration for good trainers now - they make a tricky job look very easy! Now I know some of the 'secrets' to a well structured course. I feel so much more confident to get back and run my own courses."

Contact H2 Training & Consultancy: Freephone: 0800 0015 151 or Email: h2@h2training.com