

DIFFICULT PARTICIPANTS

One of the most challenging things for us to deal with as facilitators is the "difficult" participant. I'm sure you've all experienced this either as a member or leader of a group. You know the kind of person I'm talking about. He's the one who keeps interrupting the group to ramble incessantly on some seemingly irrelevant topic. It seems that everyone but him can sense the tension in the room and the members psychically screaming for him to "Please shut up!"

Or you maybe you remember the antagonist. The one member that has to disagree, argue, or criticize every comment someone makes.

We've been so conditioned to be "nice" in our culture that we feel tongue-tied and helpless when someone else isn't being so nice in our groups. As facilitators, and hopefully as participants too, we have got to learn to compassionately and effectively handle these kinds of behaviors. The next two issues will be devoted to methods of handling individual behaviors that we might consider "difficult" as facilitators. This issue provides some general guidelines. The next will go into strategies to handle specific behaviors.

Example

General Guidelines

1. When possible, talk to them privately to point out the problem and coach them toward more desirable behaviors. Approach as a friend and ally, not as an authority figure.
2. Focus on a specific desired behavior.
3. Don't judge a person's behavior as right or wrong.
4. Try to maintain the balance between protecting the group from the distracting behavior and protecting the individual from undue attack.
5. Accept what they're doing. Describe it. Ask about it.
6. Legitimize their feelings, perceptions, or rights.
7. Work with their issues when it will be productive for the group, or defer the issues to a time when the group is likely to perform well, despite the distraction.
8. Be sure to have ground rules and norms for participation, so that the group can self monitor. Refer to the group for enforcement when someone is out of line.

Adapted from "The Skilled Facilitator," by Justice and Jamieson.

About the Author

Steve Davis, M.A., M.S., is an Facilitator's Coach, Infoprenuer, and free-lance human, helping facilitators, organizational leaders, educators, trainers, coaches and consultants present themselves confidently, access their creativity, empower their under-performing groups, enhance their facilitation skills, and build their business online and offline. Does leading or participating in groups frustrate you? Subscribe to his free weekly ezine at www.MasterFacilitatorJournal.com and contact him [here](#) to schedule a free exploratory coaching session.