

CLASSIC FACILITATOR CHALLENGES

1

PROBLEM	TYPICAL MISTAKE	EFFECTIVE RESPONSE
DOMINATION BY A HIGHLY VERBAL MEMBER	Inexperienced facilitators often try to control this person. "Excuse me, Mr. Q, do you mind if I let someone else take a turn?" Or, even worse, "Excuse me, Ms. Q, but you're taking up a lot of the group's time . . ."	When one or two people are over-participating, everyone else is under-participating. So, focus your efforts on the passive majority. Encourage <i>them</i> to participate more. Trying to change the dominant participants just sends even more attention their way.
GOOFING AROUND IN THE MIDST OF A DISCUSSION	Try to "organize" people by getting into a power struggle with them. Raise your voice if necessary. Single out the individuals who seem to be the ringleaders. "All right everyone, let's get back to work." (Or better yet, "Focus, people, focus!")	Often a break is the best response. People become undisciplined when they are overloaded or worn out. After a breather, they will be much better able to focus. Alternatively, ask for advice: "Is there something we ought to be doing differently?"
LOW PARTICIPATION BY THE ENTIRE GROUP	Assume that silence means consent. Don't ask whether everyone understands the key issues and agrees with what's being said. (That just wastes time unnecessarily.) Praise the group for all the work that's getting done, in the hope that flattery will motivate more people to participate.	Always be suspicious of low participation. Dependency, anger, or fear are often factors in play. The group, however, may not want to surface those feelings. If not, shift from <i>open discussion</i> to a format that lowers the anxiety level. Work in small groups, or build a list, or try a highly structured activity like a <i>fishbowl</i> or a <i>jigsaw</i>.

CLASSIC FACILITATOR CHALLENGES

2

PROBLEM	TYPICAL MISTAKE	EFFECTIVE RESPONSE
SEVERAL DIFFERENT TOPICS BEING DISCUSSED AT THE SAME TIME	"Come on, everyone, let's get back on track." "Focus, people, focus!!" Select the topic you think the group would most benefit from discussing, and do your best to sell your point of view: "I'm not at all attached to this, but . . ."	Use <i>tracking</i>: Name the various topics in play. "Let me see if I can summarize the key themes being discussed." Use <i>linking</i>: "Can you help us link your idea to the central issues before us?" Create a <i>parking lot</i> for ideas and issues to return to later.
MANY PEOPLE INTERRUPTING ONE ANOTHER, IN COMPETITION FOR AIRTIME	Take control. Don't be shy about interrupting the conversation yourself, in order to exhort people to be more respectful. Select one person to speak, but give no indication of whose turn will come next. That would undercut spontaneity.	If you must interrupt in order to restore decorum, say, "Pat, I'm going to cut in here. First, let's make sure your point is being heard. Then, I want to suggest a process that will cut down on further interruptions." After you complete your paraphrase, use <i>stacking</i>, <i>tracking</i>, and <i>sequencing</i> to organize the group.
PEOPLE TREAT ONE ANOTHER DISRESPECTFULLY	Ignore it altogether. No sense throwing fuel on the fire. Pretend that posting a ground rule imploring people to "be respectful" will somehow create respectful behavior.	Increase the frequency of your paraphrasing. People under pressure need support. If proposing a ground rule, be sure to create time for the group to reflect on what's happening and what they want to do differently.

CLASSIC FACILITATOR CHALLENGES

3

PROBLEM	TYPICAL MISTAKE	EFFECTIVE RESPONSE
MINIMAL PARTICIPATION BY MEMBERS WHO DON'T FEEL INVESTED IN THE TOPIC	Act as though silence signifies agreement with what's been said. Ignore them and be thankful they're not making trouble.	Encourage a discussion: "What's important to me about this topic?" Warm up in pairs, so everyone has time to explore his or her stake in the outcome. Before next meeting, ask the planners to assess why people don't seem more invested.
POOR FOLLOW-THROUGH ON ASSIGNMENTS	Give an ineffective pep talk. Ignore it. Excuse it: "Oh well, we didn't really need that information anyway."	Assign the work to teams. Build in a report-back process at a midpoint before the assignment is due. This gives anyone having trouble a chance to get help.
FAILURE TO START ON TIME AND END ON TIME	Announce, "We're going to start in five minutes." Then, five minutes later, repeat the same announcement, but this time say, "Just a few more minutes." Wait for the arrival of the "people who count," but don't bother waiting for anyone with lower ranking. When it's time to end, go overtime without asking. If anyone has to leave, they should know how to tiptoe out without disturbing anyone.	Option 1: Start the meeting when it is scheduled to begin. (Principle: Keep your word.) Option 2: Wait for everyone to arrive. (Principle: If someone's attendance isn't valuable, why is s/he coming in the first place?) Waiting for all will demonstrate that one person's tardiness can waste a lot of salaried staff time. Note: Make sure it is the person-in-charge, not you, who sets the policy and enforces it. If meetings chronically run late, improve your agenda planning.

CLASSIC FACILITATOR CHALLENGES

4

PROBLEM	TYPICAL MISTAKE	EFFECTIVE RESPONSE
TWO PEOPLE LOCKING HORNS	Put the focus exclusively on the interaction between the two disputing parties, as though no one else in the room has an opinion on the issue at hand. Or, treat the two like children. "Come on, you two, can't you get along?"	Reach out to others: "Who else has an opinion on this issue?" or "Are there any other issues that need to be discussed before we go too much further with this one?" Remember: When the majority is passive, focus your attention on <i>them</i> , not on the over-active few.
ONE OR TWO SILENT MEMBERS IN A GROUP WHOSE OTHER MEMBERS PARTICIPATE ACTIVELY	"Mr. Z, you haven't talked much today. Is there anything you'd like to add?" This may work when a shy member has nonverbally indicated a wish to speak. But all too often, the quiet person feels put on the spot and withdraws further.	"I'd like to get opinions from those who haven't talked for a while." Breaking into small groups works even better, allowing shy members to speak up without being pressed to compete for airtime.
SIDE CONVERSATIONS AND WHISPERED CHUCKLES	Ignore the behavior and hope it will go away. Chastise the whisperers, in the belief that humiliation is an excellent corrective.	With warmth and humor, make an appeal for decorum: "As you know, those who don't hear the joke often wonder if someone is laughing at <i>them</i> ." If the problem persists, assume there's a reason. Has the topic become boring and stale? Do people need a break?

CLASSIC FACILITATOR CHALLENGES

5

PROBLEM

TYPICAL MISTAKE

EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

QUIBBLING
ABOUT TRIVIAL
PROCEDURES

Lecture the group about
wasting time and "spinning
our wheels."

Space out, doodle, and think
to yourself, "It's their fault
we're not getting anything
done."

Have the group step back
from the content of the issue
and talk about the process.
Ask the group, "What is
really going on here?"

SOMEONE
BECOMES
STRIDENT AND
REPETITIVE

At lunch, talk behind the
person's back. Tell the
person-in-charge that s/he
must take more control.

Confront the person during
a break. When the meeting
resumes, raise your eyebrows
or shake your head
whenever s/he misbehaves.

People repeat themselves
because they don't feel
heard. Summarize the
person's point of view until
s/he feels understood.

Encourage participants to
state the views of group
members whose views are
different from their own.

SOMEONE
DISCOVERS A
COMPLETELY
NEW PROBLEM
THAT NO ONE
HAD PREVIOUSLY
NOTED

Try to come up with reasons
to discourage people from
opening up this new can of
worms.

Pretend not to hear the
person's comments.

Wake up! This may be what
you've been waiting for: the
doorway into a new way of
thinking about the whole
situation.