Difficult People In Your Group?

I just got back from doing a training session for SCORE leaders where our topic was how to be an effective group facilitator (many SCORE chapters give sessions where they invite small business CEOs into a forum or roundtable which is heavy on group discussion and participation). I asked them to think about their biggest issue that they have to deal with when they are leading their group. I was amazed at the most popular answer. Can you guess what it was?

Their biggest issue was “how to effectively deal with the person who wants to talk all the time or who always has the answer for everything”. Or put in “Minnesota -speak” what do you do when certain people are overly engaged or a bit too zealous?

It’s amazing how much a group dynamic can change, based on the domineering tendencies of just one or two people. Sometimes these people are well intentioned and merely inquisitive. Sometimes, a difficult person is on the lookout for chances to be argumentative. Either way, effective facilitators must keep the group focused and on schedule. At times, we just may have to quiet or redirect individuals who are interrupting the learning process.

I am sure you can identify with these folks. I remember reading some of Jason Teteak’s work where he (many other writers have done the same) gives some names and descriptions to these folks. He says you’ve likely encountered these challenging participants:

- **Talk hogs** dominate the discussion. Their eagerness might come from positive excitement or from negative selfishness.

- **Know-it-all**s have opinions on everything and are sure everyone else needs to hear them ... all the time. Know-it-alls often think they are more qualified than the person in front of the group.

- **Resenters.** If your group consists of individuals who attend voluntarily, you may not have to deal with resenteres. But if you call meetings or host sessions that someone thinks he or she should not have to attend, you may have to deal with this kind of dismissive hostility.

- **Hecklers.** Speaking of hostility, a heckler would be a nuisance in your group. You may not face outright ridicule from someone in your small group, but you may hear off-putting remarks, backhanded compliments or tasteless jokes.
Gripers. Not everyone shows up filled with joy and cheer, but gripers bring more negativity than others. They might grumble about the topic, social setting or any number of things.

The issue is that whether well-meaning or intentionally difficult, overactive participants discourage participation. They can disrupt the entire gathering, prevent anything from being communicated or even cause other people to drop out of the group (if not physically, certainly emotionally).

What can we do about it? Here are few things that effective small group leaders do to keep sessions on track and engaging (I got much of this from Clay Morgan of Dallas, Texas who writes on communications and organizational strategy).

1. Create a safe environment for participation
   Everything we do as small-group leaders should aim toward balancing participation. It starts with good, active listening. We should hear what others are trying to communicate without projecting our thoughts and expectations onto them.

   Often, one individual dominates a discussion because other participants are shy or need time to warm up to engagement. Make sure to allow sufficient “wait time” after asking questions. Avoid the temptation to call on the same person who’s ready to answer first every time.

   Accept comments without judgment. When someone feels nervous about getting involved in the conversation, she or he will be especially vulnerable to negative reactions sent their way. Not only must we respect each voice and correct misinformation respectfully; we also must establish a group culture in which no one is criticized unduly by peers.

2. Keep discussion on course
   The conversation is rolling. The next trick is to keep the exchange healthy and fair. Remember that it takes courage to speak up and offer ideas, and participants want to know they’ve been heard. But what do you do when someone has questions or comments that may take the discussion off course?

   The “parking lot” is a way of saving distracting ideas until the group is ready to circle back and address them. You can use a special flipchart set off to the side, or flip to a back page in a workbook. Consider designating someone to keep notes on parking-lot ideas and questions.
Another way to help reign in roundabout speakers is simply to ask them to “Tie it in for us.” Usually, participants have a point to make. However, most of us, especially when speaking in public, get lost or sidetracked from our main thought as we speak.

Find ways to move the discussion forward while redirecting back to the original point. Here are a couple of approaches to consider:

- Say something like, “Interesting point. Help me tie it to our discussion on … ”
- Paraphrase their comment/question, “Are you saying … ?”
- Summarize what you think you hear to guarantee clarity. “What I hear you saying is … Is that right?”
- Simply say, “Thanks for sharing” and move on.

Never letting them see you sweat doesn’t mean never letting them see you vulnerable. If you don’t know something, be honest and ask for help finding the answer. Even the most prepared facilitator cannot anticipate every question.

3. Neutralize negative behavior

Despite your best efforts, you may end up with someone who purposely seeks to antagonize one or more group members. If you run into someone like this, always address the unwanted behavior and not the person.

Here are a few ways to consider responding if you encounter negative behavior:

- Use gentle and appropriate humor for redirection.
- Restate the ground rules directly.
- Direct your questions to the individual for clarification.
- Seek help from the group.
- Take a break to address the issue directly.

People don’t always know they’re behaving badly, so it’s good to extend grace, especially as you’re getting to know new group members.

Whether you’re sitting in a friend’s home with a small group or around a table with your team, be prepared to navigate tension with smoothness and grace by thinking ahead.

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