

Working With Disruptive Participants

From Thiagarajan, S. *Facilitator's Toolkit*. Bloomington, IN: Workshops by Thiagi, 2000.

Strategies for Handling Disruptive Participants

- ❑ **Improve the trust level.** Make it easy for the team members to give constructive feedback to each other.
- ❑ **Trust the team.** Given time, most teams will bring disruptive members under control.
- ❑ **Develop basic guidelines.** During the first meeting, establish ground rules for appropriate behaviours during the activity.
- ❑ **Reward appropriate behaviours.** Recognize and reinforce supportive participant behaviours.
- ❑ **Share the responsibility.** Ask the participants to handle disruptive behaviours whenever they notice things going wrong.
- ❑ **Model productive participation.** Practice what you preach. Ask others to demonstrate cooperative, disciplined behaviour.
- ❑ **Divide and conquer.** Break the participants into smaller groups. This reduces the size of the group and increases individual air-time.
- ❑ **Try the buddy system.** Organize the participants into pairs. Ask each person to control his or her partner. It takes two. Work with a co-facilitator. Take turns to focus on the participants and on the process.
- ❑ **The silent treatment.** If things get tense, declare a time-out. Have the participants analyze what's going on. Discuss their feelings, then return to the task.
- ❑ **Take a detour.** Have a standard procedure for tabling a topic and moving on to less controversial issues.
- ❑ **Send subliminal messages.** Decorate the meeting room walls with appropriate posters (for example, *Blame the process, not the person!*)
- ❑ **Conduct a debriefing.** After each meeting, ask participants to evaluate their performance and to establish ground rules for future sessions.
- ❑ **Conduct an off-line meeting.** Provide constructive feedback to a disruptive participant during a break.

Tactics for Handling Disruptive Participants

Originally designed for use by team facilitators in meetings, many of the techniques suggested in these checklists can also be used when facilitating groups and group activities.

These checklists suggest practical tactics for handling different types of disruptive behaviours. They can be used by the facilitator or her/his co-facilitator. A more effective approach will be to distribute copies of different checklists to different group members so that they monitor and handle different types of problems.

The checklists are organized into informal clusters. There is some overlap among the different clusters.

How to Handle Disruptive Talking Behaviours

1. Talks too much

- Call on others.
- Impose the “air-time” limits on participants.
- Give participants poker chips worth 2 minutes of talking time.
- Interrupt the person with a question directed at someone else.
- Acknowledge the comment and involve others: “Idea, that was an interesting insight. Hal, what are your views on this issue?”
- Explain to the excessive talker that it is important to hear from everyone.
- Assign the role of time keeping to a participant.

2. Does not talk

- Direct questions to the silent participant. Ask questions which can be answered easily.
- Ask the silent participant to summarize someone else’s statement.
- Ask everyone to take turns to make a 1-minute presentation.
- Pair up participants and ask each pair to discuss the topic between themselves for a 2-minute period.
- Ask questions related to the silent participant’s areas of interest.
- Ask participants to write their ideas on index cards.
- Reinforce (in a sincere fashion) any comment from the taciturn participant.
- Assign the role of identifying and drawing out reluctant participants to a team member.



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3. Has difficulty talking

- Don't get impatient. Don't complete the sentences for the other person.
- Use a buddy system in which partners hold private conversations before participating in the meeting.
- Hold a one-on-one conversation with the participant during a coffee break or before the meeting.

4. Talks too loudly (or too softly)

- Ignore this behaviour unless it disrupts the meeting.
- Give direct, non-threatening feedback requesting the participant to modify his or her volume.
- Give feedback to the participant before or after the meeting or during the coffee break.
- Ask a friend of the participant to give feedback.

5. Talks in technical jargon

- Compliment the participant on his or her technical expertise and ask for a simplified explanation.
- Request the participant to translate his or her comment into layperson's language.
- Ask other participants if they understood the comment.
- Ask for clarification of terms and concepts you don't understand.
- Ask another technically competent person to help clarify terms and concepts.
- Avoid sarcastic remarks and threatening demands.

6. Talk in an overly convoluted, politically-correct fashion

- Compliment the person for his or her sensitivity and ask for a clarification of terms you did not understand.
- Reassure the participants that all comments will be held in strict confidence and they can feel free to speak their minds.
- Ask other participants if they understood the comments.
- Check with participants from various minority groups for their preferences.
- Avoid sarcastic or insensitive remarks.
- Discourage other participants from such remarks.

7. Uses excessive humor

- Thank the participant for adding a light touch to the discussion, and request for comments directly related to the topic.
- Relate the humorous comment to the discussion topic.
- Ignore the humorous remark and follow it up with a serious one.
- Ask the participant to relate his or her story, joke, or humorous comment to the topic under discussion.

- Give feedback to the participant before or after the meeting or during the coffee break.

8. Talks in an excessively serious fashion

- Model light comments to help highlight the humor in the situation.
- Invite a participant with a sense of humor to respond to the previous comment.
- Avoid sarcastic or insulting comments about the seriousness of the participant.
- Briefly discuss the importance of seeing the light side of serious topics to encourage creative problem solving.

9. Talks to someone else on the side

- Make a non-sarcastic request to the participants to share their thoughts with the rest of the group.
- Direct a question to one of the participants holding the side conversation.
- Ask one of the participants to react to the previous comment.
- Stop the discussion and look expectantly at the disruptive participants.
- Walk nearer to the disruptive participants, touch one of them, and maintain eye contact.

10. Talks on to the facilitator or the team leader

- Emphasize that the meeting is a dialogue among all participants.
- Request the participant to address his or her remarks to the team.
- Avoid eye contact. Move away from the participant.
- Avoid commenting on the participant's remark. Wait for some other participant to comment.

How to Handle Disruptive Behaviors Related to Homework

11. Doesn't do the homework

- Ask all participants to take turns to report on the conclusions from their pre-meeting assignment.
- Before the regular meeting, pair up participants for a brief conversation related to the pre-meeting preparation.
- In the previous meeting and in your memo about the present meeting, be specific about preparatory activities. Clearly explain that everyone should complete the homework before coming to the meeting.
- Before the meeting, pair up participants to complete the preparatory activity.
- A few days before the meeting, make a telephone call or send a memo to the participants to remind them about the pre-meeting preparation.

12. Does excessive homework and comes to the meeting with all the answers

- Praise the participant for his or her enthusiasm. Explain the importance of withholding final decisions and solutions until everyone has reviewed, analyzed, and discussed the problem.
- Give the participant additional preparatory tasks (such as interviewing important stakeholders) to channel his or her energy.
- Avoid punishing the person for his or her efforts of ignoring the products of that effort.

13. Does the homework only when an external facilitation is around

- Encourage participants to act as a self-managed team which completes all tasks even when the external facilitator is absent.
- Pair up participants so that each person is responsible for his or her partner completing the task on time.
- Encourage team members to negotiate a clear contract with each other regarding the preparatory assignments.
- Clearly specify when the assignment is to be complete and who is to receive the products.
- Train the local facilitator on how to delegate assignments and how to ensure their timely completion.

How to Handle Disruptive Behaviors Related to Time

14. Behaves in an impatient fashion. Does not want to waste time in discussion

- Stress the importance of the topic and the need for taking time to systematically analyze the problem.
- Before the meeting (or during the coffee break), explain to the participant the importance of getting everyone's input and ownership.
- Use a standardized, structured approach for discussing topics.
- Specify time allocations for various discussions in the agenda.
- Ask the impatient participant to share his or her analysis of the topic and alternative conclusions.
- Channel the participant's energy into analyzing the problem situation.

15. Wastes time on tangential discussions

- Allocate discussion times in the agenda and impose interim deadlines for the completion of each agenda item.
- Redirect the participant to the topic by asking relevant questions
- Ask the participant to relate his or her comments to the discussion topic.
- Ask specific questions of other participants.
- Tell the participant that his or her comments are tangential.

16. Gets into excessive details

- Specify the level of discussion. Explain that the team is working at the big-picture level. Ask the participant to hold his or her detailed comments for a later discussion.
- Differentiate between broad decision-making and details action planning can be undertaken later by a smaller group of implementers.
- Suggest that detailed discussions of the topic can be postponed until after a preliminary discussion of broad concepts.
- Thank the participant for his or her detailed analysis, and ask for a written report for the benefit of the other team members.

17. Arrives late and leaves early

- When you invite people to the meeting, clearly state the start and end times and the expectation punctual arrival and participant until the scheduled closing time.
- If late arrivals present a major problem, ask team members to take time to analyze the causes and to establish ground rules.
- Stop rewarding latecomers by summarizing what happened earlier.
- Establish a buddy system to make each team member responsible for the punctuality of someone else.
- Start your meetings on time – and end them on time.

18. Interrupted by messages, telephone calls, or beepers

- Emphasize the expectation that participants will not be interrupted during the meeting.
- Remind participants about the no-interrupting ground rule at the beginning of the meeting.
- Hold the meeting away from the office.
- Provide appropriate breaks (for checking messages) during lengthy meetings.
- Suggest that people do not attend they meeting if they have other critical commitments.

How to Handle Disruptive Interpersonal Clashes

19. Behaves in a defensive fashion

- Blame the process, not people. Model this behavior and encourage other participants to do the same.
- If a participant gets defensive, avoid an escalation of the conflict. Focus on the topic and the task.
- Leave the controversial topic temporarily and move on to another topic on the agenda.
- Declare a coffee break and discuss the problem with the participant.
- Break the team into smaller groups and continue the discussion.



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20. Behaves in an excessively emotional fashion

- Conduct team building activities related to expressing and accepting feelings.
- Acknowledge the right of the participant to feel whatever what he or she wants to – and express those feelings.
- Leave the topic temporarily and move on to some less controversial topic.
- Declare a coffee break and discuss the participants' feelings and concerns.
- Stop the discussion on the topic. After a 1-minute pause, discuss the participants' feelings. Return to the main discussion after clarifying and dealing with these feelings.

21. Behaves in an excessively cautious fashion

- Stress the importance of rapid action. Explain how making no decisions will result in negative consequences.
- Suggest some temporary action while the team collects and analyzes more data.
- Reframe the activity as a pilot test and not as the solution.
- Suggest short-cut techniques for data collection (such as using existing records or reports.)
- Ask the participant to plan for data collection while others discuss contingency plans.

22. Behaves in a resistive fashion

- Declare time out from the main discussion to discuss how the change in likely to affect different people.
- Review the rationale for the new processes.
- Review the costs and benefits.
- Identify and discuss the participants' concerns.
- Shift the level of analysis from the individual's point of view to the organization's needs.
- Avoid high-pressure sale of the new ideas.
- Talk to the individual while the other team members continue the main discussion.

23. Constantly seeks attention

- Ignore show-off comments and behaviors.
- Impose equal-time ground rules to ensure everyone's participation.
- Before and after the meeting (or during the coffee break), talk with the participant.
- Interrupt the person and for comments from the others.

24. Challenges others' statements

- Thank the participant for playing the devil's advocate.
- Suggest that he or she take on an advocacy role from time to time.
- Use an administrative-hearings model. Have a debate with the pros and cons of various strategies.
- Differentiate between personal attacks and attacks on perceptions and solutions. Ask for help in shifting from personal attacks to process analysis.
- Avoid losing your temper and becoming defensive.
- Randomly assign positive and negative roles to different participants and keep shifting these roles once every 5 minutes.

25. Refuses to participate

- Ask everyone to take turns expressing their ideas and reactions.
- Ask questions related to the withdrawn participant's areas of interest.
- Pair up participants and ask each pair to conduct a preliminary discussion.
- Divide the group into smaller subgroups and continue the discussions. Ask the withdrawn participant to be his or her subgroup's reporter when the entire group meets again.
- Conduct a brainstorming session using index cards. Ask participants to write down their ideas anonymously.
- During a break, ask help from other participants to encourage the withdrawn participant.

26. Throws temper tantrums

- Keep calm. Don't become defensive.
- Acknowledge the participant's right to express his or her anger.
- Declare time out while the participants collect their thoughts.
- Suggest an individual meeting with the angry participant at a later time.
- Paraphrase the participant's angry outburst to demonstrate that you have heard him or her.
- Don't rush to fix the problem. Let the person express his or her anger.

27. Makes sexually and racially insensitive comments

- Directly confront the person and explain your displeasure.
- Clearly explain what the participant said, and how you feel, and why you feel that way.
- Acknowledge that the participant probably meant well, but specify the negative impact of his or her comments.
- Own your statements. Don't attribute your hurt to others.
- Ask for a personal discussion after the meeting.

28. Accuses others of sexual harassment or racial insult

- Don't ignore the comment. Acknowledge it and paraphrase it.
- Ask the accused participant to clarify his or her intention. Encourage this participant to apologize if appropriate.
- If you had made an insensitive statement, immediately and unconditionally apologize.
- Suggest that the two participants hold a separate discussion in another location while the other team members continue the main discussion.
- Avoid polarizing the group. Declare a break to allow small-group discussions of the incident.

29. Withdraws when “higher-ups” are around

- Assign different job roles to each participant. Ask participants to conduct the discussion in that role.
- At the beginning of the meeting, have the senior person emphasize his or her preference for open and frank discussions. During the meeting, model open-minded behavior.
- Model giving and accepting constructive feedback.
- Suggest anonymous input processes (for example, writing comments on cards.)