

Dealing with Challenging Participants

Participants who have challenging behaviors interfere not only with your presentation but with the learning experience of the group. Listed below are some behaviors and tips to handle these behaviors.

- **Arguing** – looking for an opportunity to disagree or pick at an idea, making personal attacks, not letting go of their own idea to hear others

Tips for handling arguing participants:

- Change the participant's focus.
- Agree with their ideas.
- Ask what the group thinks.
- Ask the participant to discuss it with you later and continue the training.
- Don't push them because they will only get worse.
- Keep your own sense of self-confidence.
- Recognize their feelings and move on.
- Acknowledge the positive points of the argument.
- **Withdrawn/Shy/Silent/Introvert** – acting indifferent or passive, not being involved in the discussion, occupying self by doodling or whispering to others, getting off the subject, lack of self-confidence

Tips for handling shy participants:

- Persuade participants to become involved and contribute to the discussion.
- Get ideas in advance for withdrawn participants.
- Have participants share ideas with someone else and then come back to the group.
- Ask the participants open-ended questions.
- Ask questions they can answer and give a positive reinforcement for any contribution.
- Let them help set up the materials and equipment before the session.
- Make eye contact with them.
- **Aggression** – going after ideas in a critical or unkind manner, blaming others, showing hostility and anger, putting down ideas or status

Tips for handling aggressive participants:

- Stay calm and keep your cool.
- "I see you have strong opinions. Let's hear what the others think."
- Respond to the whole group, not to the one person.
- Remain neutral.
- **Complaining** – finding fault, blaming, complaining that things are unfair, always expressing dissatisfaction with the way things are

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Tips for handling complaining participants:

- Shift gears for a few minutes and try problem solving.
- Be patient with the participant.
- Commit to getting the person to focus on solutions.
- Identify the key points of the training (even if you have to interrupt).
- Shift focus to a solution that is agreeable for everyone.
- **Put Downs** – discouraging anything new or different with “It will never work,” or “We tried that once, and it was a failure.”

Tips for handling participants who put down new or different ideas:

- Ask how the rest of the group views the idea.
- Ask the person to offer a replacement idea.
- Tell the participant the idea is a possibility and ask the others their view point.
- Focus on the discussion.
- **Talking** – does not relinquish the floor or monopolizes the conversation

Tips for handling the talkative participant:

- Refer to the ground rules of respecting timeliness and listening.
- Use non-verbal signals such as glancing at your watch to indicate your concern with time or using your hands to indicate that it is time to wrap up.

- Speak privately with participant to seek understanding of what the person wants.

- **Attention-Seeking** – clowns around and disrupts the team’s efforts to come to a conclusion or calls attention to self

Tips for handling attention-seekers:

- Shift focus to the task at hand.
- Restate the purpose of the work or discussion.
- Ask how the interruption or behavior relates to the topic or task.
- Call on the person for serious dialogue to show that he can contribute. Ask “I missed the point of your joke. Could you give me your point straight?”
- Reward the serious side of the person by complimenting desired behavior.

- **Arrogance** – highly assertive and outspoken, intends to get things done in the way they know is best, very controlling and self-assured

Tips for handling an arrogant participant:

- Know your subject matter.
- Restate the participant’s ideas.
- Agree with parts of these ideas.
- Present ideas using words like “maybe,” “perhaps,” or “I wonder if.”
- Use “we” or “us” instead of “I” or “you.”
- Use questions to get expanded ideas.

