

KickSTART

Facilitating With Disrupters

Disruptive behaviour comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes, as a general rule, anything which stops you from moving on towards your end goal and side tracks the rest of the group counts as disruptive. Here are a handful of examples:

Types of disrupter

Aggressive

Gets unnecessarily excited violent or hostile during the conversation

- Understand why they are aggressive
- Is it the issue, the team or the process?
- Talk with the person individually (outside of the group) to explain suitable behaviour

Negative

Can be very cynical or frustrated by the session then allows this to taint everybody else's views

- Question to understand why they feel negative towards the session?
- What's frustrating them?
- Consider pairing up with a Supporter
- Pair the negative ones together for group sessions

Expert

Also known as a "know it all", can be very insistent and drown out others voices

- Direct questioning to others to avoid reliance on their answers
- Use their knowledge, capture their suggestions
- Validate suggestions with the others in the team

Unresponsive

Not engaged in the conversation, may be sullen and appear uncaring

- Direct questioning to them
- Praise contribution
- Be mindful not to overdo it as they may be a natural "reflector" and take time to digest information

Supporter

Actively engaged in the conversation and supporting what you are trying to achieve

- Consider pairing up with negative or unresponsive participants
- Note, does their opinion change when talking with different people? If so question individually to ensure you gain their opinions without influence

Fence Sitter

Not prepared to come to a conclusion, likes to debate the issues and sees both sides of the argument

- Use direct questioning if they had to make a decision what would it be and why?
- Good to involve in pros and cons brainstorming

Facilitator

Likes to take control of the discussion, not always helpfully

- Let them scribe on the whiteboard / flipchart but define this role beforehand
- Explain that they have been selected for their knowledge to participate in the session

Distracted

Clearly not with you in the session, their mind is elsewhere

- Find out if they have other issues they need to resolve at that time, may be better off out of the session than in it
- Use direct questioning
- Set some ground rules

How to deal with them

As a rule of thumb a good approach for dealing with disruptive people is to find out why they are being disruptive and then address their issue or concern (It is probably the only sensible way). As Stephen Covey would say “*seek first to understand and then to be understood*”.

There are many ways you can tackle a situation, but they all follow the same basic framework:

1. Understand what the person's issue is
2. Explain what you need to achieve
3. Find the common ground to work from

The way in which you choose to do this is context specific, but you could try:

Addressing the person before the session

Look through the attendee list. Identify anybody who is likely to have concerns or issues with what you are trying to do then spend time with them before the session.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure ~ Benjamin Franklin

Addressing the person in the session

If somebody is being difficult it is perfectly legitimate to explicitly ask them there and then what the issue is. The advantage of this is that it will allow you to nip things in the bud; also it gives you the opportunity to ask the rest of the group what they think. Peer feedback is a very powerful thing. The risk of course is that you do make the issue very public. This may or may not be helpful.

Addressing the person in a break

Depending on the severity of the issue you could either wait until the next break to take the person aside for a conversation or call a halt to proceedings and address it there and then in private. I have never yet found a group who isn't more than happy to take 10 minutes for a cup of tea. The group will also recognise and understand why you have called a halt.

You should be cognisant though that this is the nuclear option, everybody will know there is a problem and want to understand how it has been handled. This will distract them from the task in hand so should be addressed when you restart.