

Facilitating Difficult Behaviour

At some point every facilitator encounters people who are behaving in a way that challenges the group. This can inspire panic and throw us off course. We might react by trying to shut down the behaviour as quickly as possible. Alternatively we might ignore it, hoping it goes away. All too often this doesn't work.

Dealing with difficult behaviour doesn't have to be stressful. With a little bit of understanding and awareness, and a few simple facilitation tools, problems can be overcome.

A lot of what's written about difficult behaviour creates stereotypes of 'difficult people' and suggests set-piece responses. We'd advocate a more sophisticated approach that will bring you more sophisticated results. Here's a step by step guide to dealing with difficult behaviour.

To sum up:

- Look and listen for the underlying cause. What needs aren't being met?
- Use an appropriate facilitation tool.
- Problem solved!

Step One:

Ask yourself 'Why?'

Pause and resist the urge to blame the person whose behaviour is 'difficult' for the current situation. Remember it's their behaviour that's difficult and not them as a person. Something is making them behave the way they are. It's your role to try and understand what that is.

Look around you – what can the body language of the group tell you. Listen to their tone of voice. These will help you diagnose the cause of the situation.

Reflect on the possibility that it may be a need they have brought to the meeting or workshop that isn't being met. In other words it may be something about the way the group is treating them, or the way that you're facilitating the session that's sparked their behaviour.

An example: Beth comes to the meeting full of enthusiasm and good ideas. She struggles to get her ideas heard because the others in the meeting are more confident speakers. When she finally gets a chance to speak, she feels that her idea is dismissed without any consideration. So, naturally she's upset – she doesn't bother making any more useful contributions. Instead she makes sarcastic remarks from the sidelines... can you blame her?

Step Two: Take action

Now you have an understanding of what's causing the behaviour you can act appropriately.

Going back to our example: it might be as simple as saying "Beth, I noticed that you were trying to share some of your ideas earlier. I'm not sure that we heard them very well – sorry about that. Would you mind explaining them again?"... or, if you don't want to put Beth on the spot, rephrase it - "OK, we've had lots of great ideas. Let's write them all up on flipchart paper so none of them get lost. Let's have a go-round – each of you add one idea that you'd like to be considered"... "have we missed any, anyone? ...yes, Beth..." and so on.

Step Three: Problem solved!

You've started to meet your 'difficult' person's needs, so naturally their difficult behaviour will subside. As easy as 1,2,3. Well maybe not, but it's not as stressful as we often think!

And finally:

Most commonly difficult behaviour is caused by a lack of listening in a group. If we don't give people clear signs that they are being heard they understandably may start to feel alienated. Plan your sessions to maximise listening using tools like group agreements, small discussion groups, and go-rounds.

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