

Managing Difficult Meeting Participants

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Joe comes in late, monopolizes conversation, and usually has his own agenda for any meeting. How can you handle him and similar difficult-to-manage participants and still have an effective meeting? Here are some tips:

Latecomers – Most important for everyone is to set a realistic meeting time. If an 8 AM start leaves most people with the potential of a traffic jam, set the start time later — and then stick to it. It may take a few meetings, but when you become known for prompt, interesting meetings, people will try harder to be on time. Don't repeat what the latecomers missed. It's their responsibility to catch up. Remember that you also owe the courtesy to those people who did arrive on time and have been participating, not to go over what was missed.

Interrupters – According to Myers Briggs, 75 percent of the population are extroverts, that is, people who need to talk through their thinking. Unfortunately, some people can't control their talking and don't seem to realize that they are monopolizing the airtime. Here are some effective methods for controlling interrupters.

- Refer to the ground rules, which should include guidelines on listening and allowing others to speak.
- Provide small group opportunities that afford more people the chance to speak.
- Take the person aside and explain the unwelcome dominance. Many times interrupters don't realize the impact of their behavior.

Personal Agenda Supporters – Sometimes people use a meeting to support their own agendas. A ground rule regarding staying focused on the stated topic should help. So too will the agenda, which you asked the group to accept. Another technique is to use a “parking lot” which allows the individual to post the topic and to put it aside for discussion at another, more appropriate, time.

Using some of the procedures for effective meetings—ground rules and agendas—will also be helpful for managing difficult participants and defining behavior parameters. The group members themselves are also a very important factor in controlling behavior. Since you asked for their concurrence with the ground rules and agenda, they have ownership and they want a productive meeting. Frequently, they will help you and the group at large by reminding difficult participants of the need to use the parking lot, of the importance of starting on time, and when it's time to let someone else speak.

Procedures for effective meetings are also helpful for managing difficult participants.