



Your Meeting: Who's in Charge?

by Janice Obuchowski

For a complete list of Harvard Business
School Publishing newsletters:
<http://newsletters.harvardbusinessonline.org>

For reprint and subscription information
for *Harvard Management Communication Letter*:
Call 800-988-0866 or 617-783-7500
<http://hmcl.harvardbusinessonline.org>

For customized and quantity orders of reprints:
Call 617-783-7626 Fax 617-783-7658
For permission to copy or republish:
Call 617-783-7587

Your Meeting: Who's in Charge?

Some people seem to delight in making meetings as unpleasant—and unproductive—as possible. Here's how to neutralize them.

by Janice Obuchowski

THERE'S ONE OR TWO IN EVERY MEETING: Colleagues who constantly talk or who glower in the corner. Coworkers who criticize every idea raised or who harp on the same theme no matter what's being discussed. These people not only make meetings unpleasant, but they also make them unproductive. And so the question is, How do you get these troublemakers to behave?

When you're facilitating a meeting, the pressure is on to make sure people stay focused and on topic. After all, the decisions made are your responsibility, which makes things that much harder when you're up against someone difficult. Keeping a meeting on track requires a few parts discipline, a few parts organization, and a dollop of courage. But take heart: there are steps you can take before the meeting begins and tactics you can apply during the meeting itself to ensure that it runs smoothly and successfully.

Meetings experts advocate taking a twofold approach to improving meetings: taking steps to prevent problems from occurring and using intervention techniques to stop them when they do.

An ounce of prevention

This preventive step sounds basic but is often overlooked: make sure you invite the right people. You'd be surprised at how many people simply are in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Another way to prevent problems is to circulate, before the meeting, an agenda outlining the meeting's goals. This will answer the question "Why does this team meet?" says Anna Maravelas, an executive coach and president of St. Paul, Minn.-based TheraRising. "Most grandstanding, dominating behaviors cease when members are clear on the reasons they meet and clear that their team mission requires collaboration."

If people don't agree on the key meeting topics, generate a list of potential key issues, and narrow them down until everyone approves. Building consensus also allows people to focus. "People aren't necessarily with you when a meeting begins. They're distracted, critical, agitated. What calms them is the sound of their own voice, so you always do something to get them to talk and make their issues vis-

WHEN A SIT-DOWN IS CALLED FOR

Sometimes none of the things you do in a meeting will help break someone of her problematic behavior. If this is the case, you need to sit down with that person and speak directly with her. Here are ways to approach the encounter.

- 1. Ask permission:** "May I talk to you about today's meeting?"
- 2. Clarify goals:** Ask the person what she hopes to get out of the meetings. Then advocate what you see as the meetings' core goals.
- 3. Describe the behavior:** "I see you doing X." This way, you each have a common reference point.
- 4. Describe the consequences:** Explain how the behavior is affecting the group's performance, and detail the consequences you see it having for the group.
- 5. Inquire about the root of the behavior:** Ask, for example, if she is upset about a particular issue.
- 6. Make a specific suggestion or request:** "At the next meeting, please try not to dismiss an idea until others have had a chance to finish their thoughts." Being unambiguous increases the likelihood that she will change her behavior.
- 7. Agree on next steps:** Getting the person to commit to changing her behavior will help her actually do so.

Derailing Meeting Derailers (continued)

ible,” says Rose Jonas, a teacher of group process at Washington University (St. Louis) and author of *Can I Lie on My Resume? Strategies That Win the Career Game* (Morrison Publishing, 2002).

You can also use the agenda to create an atmosphere in which no one meeting participant can dominate. Allow specific, finite amounts of time to discuss ideas. For instance, write on your agenda, “What are the key initiatives that are going to get funded this year? Everyone, take two minutes to describe,” says Mary Beth Tahar, chairman of the board at Interaction Associates, a meetings consultancy.

Consider keeping a flip-chart on hand so that, as people bring up irrelevant ideas, you can put them in the “parking lot” and then move on quickly before the meeting gets sidetracked. When people stray off topic, advises Jonas, “say, ‘Interesting issue and not to be overlooked—let’s add it to the list.’ He or she feels heard; the issue will be taken care of later, and it doesn’t disrupt the meeting.”

People can also act up by loudly voicing their complaints or by becoming sullen if they feel their time is being wasted. So reward participants for being efficient. “If a meeting is called for an hour, announce that you can get through the agenda in 45 minutes if all attend to business. The group will focus on getting back that extra time,” Jonas says.

Time for intervention

No matter how much you work to avoid trouble, though, it will invariably happen, so you need to have some techniques at hand for regaining and sustaining focus:

Speak up.

Articulate the problem; you’d be surprised at how getting things out in the open will help you solve lingering issues more quickly. If, for instance, people continue to discuss something after the matter has been concluded, you could say, “Even though we’ve already closed discussion on issue A, we keep bringing it up.”

If that doesn’t work, try describing what should be going on: “Issue B is the topic at hand. Let’s devote another 10 minutes just to this topic.” If you do this consistently enough and people see that it works, they’re likely to try it themselves. Peer pressure, in this case, is a good thing. By modeling assertive but polite behavior, you’re subtly enlisting others to help you get the derailers back on track.

Establish parameters.

If someone at the meeting seems inclined to speak indefinitely, ask her how long she needs to express herself.

For example, say, “OK, it sounds like you’d like to talk about rebranding. How long would you like to talk about it?” When she is about to go over the allotted time, tell her how long she has spoken.

Putting parameters on the discussion provides structure while still allowing individuals time to have their say.

Body language is a great way to reinforce your message.

Ask for an explanation.

Everyone is familiar with someone who feels his ideas are The Truth—End of Story. This type of person can have a devastating effect on a meeting. Forced to listen to something they’ve probably heard countless times before, the others

in the group resent the waste of their time and blame the meeting leader for not cutting off the windbag.

Stopping such a person can be tough. One tactic is to ask him to explain himself. It’s very rare that someone stops the person speaking and says, “Tell me about the underlying thoughts that bring you to your conclusions,” notes Tahar. “Just stop and say, ‘You have a concern—tell me more about it.’” The aggressor’s energy will be diffused, and it’s likely you’ll be able to solve the problem then and there.

Use body language.

Whatever the issue at hand, body language is a great way to reinforce your message. For instance, to regain focus,

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR GROUP CAN’T REACH CONSENSUS

If your group is struggling to reach consensus, consider asking the conflicted parties to reverse roles and articulate how they would feel if they were in the shoes of the person with the opposing viewpoint, suggests Frances A. Micale, a consultant, trainer, and author of *Meetings Made Easy: The Ultimate Fix-It Guide* (Entrepreneur Press, 2004). She also proposes the group take a break, which may help everyone evaluate the issues more objectively. “If people can take some time in quiet thought, the issue may not seem as serious,” she writes. “Often people will even use the break time to work out their differences privately.” Finally, you might suggest the team consider how others have solved a similar issue: “How has the finance department handled this?” “Do we know what other people in our industry have done in similar situations?”

ADVOCATING YOUR POINT OF VIEW

For group work to be successful, all in the group must be adept at articulating their own viewpoints and respectful in responding to others' ideas and opinions.

Say someone has just finished explaining why he thinks an issue is crucial. Another person quickly points out that she doesn't think the issue is important at all. Feeling attacked, the first person criticizes the second. In this way, a meeting can quickly devolve into petty bickering and ancillary arguments.

To prevent squabbling and hurt feelings, and to keep the meeting moving, advocate that attendees do two things: reserve judgment when others are speaking and respond to one another's ideas in positive, unthreatening ways. "Assume the best, and remember you're all responsible for the success of the collective," says Mary Beth Tahar, chairman of the board at Interaction Associates.

She suggests people remember to do the following:

1. State their opinion along with their rationale: They should make a compelling case, including data and offering solutions.
2. Ask for input: They should demonstrate that they're willing to hear others' reactions.
3. Check their motivation: Are they trying to resolve a problem or prove that someone else is wrong?

walk to the center of the room. To encourage participation, ask for ideas while holding your palms up. To convey interest, lean forward. To acknowledge another's ideas, use eye contact.

Eye contact is also the first step you should take when trying to head off a troublemaker. If someone is acting up, look at her directly. If that doesn't work, gradually escalate your response. Stand up, walk halfway to her, and make eye contact again. Most people take the hint by this point.

As a last resort

Even when all these measures have been taken, there will always be a few who stubbornly persist in their bad meeting behavior. In such cases, give the person direct feedback in a one-on-one setting, being polite but firm. (See the sidebar "When a Sit-Down Is Called For.") And if that doesn't work, buck up your courage and give the person feedback in front of the group. Derailers do what they do "because they can and because most meeting leaders aren't as brave as they need to be," says Jonas. So say, "I appreciate the input, but I'd like to stay focused on the issue at hand." The group will likely murmur its support. ✱

Janice Obuchowski can be reached at
jobuchowski@hbsp.harvard.edu.