

## Handling Conflictive Behavior at Meetings

Ensuring that time at meetings is used efficiently and effectively is no easy matter. Some conflictive situations slow down and even stop the forward movement and feelings of satisfaction of a group.

Managing conflicts is a matter of style. Not all actions are right for all persons. Additionally, the individuals must be considered as do their motivations. And, of course, each total situation is unique.

On the following pages are listed some common conflictive behaviors, some suggested motivations for the behavior, and some suggested actions for managing the situations. You will, undoubtedly, recognize all the common behaviors. Possible motivations are listed to make the leader cognizant of the fact that individuals are motivated by different reasons; one behavior does not automatically mean a single motivation. Although leaders will not always know the motivations of participants, they may wish to make assumptions to direct their actions. Each suggested action should be considered separately; they are not listed in progressive or priority order. Some situations could require using several actions within a few minutes.

The suggested actions are directed toward the individual in charge of the meeting. Most actions, however, are as effective when employed by members of the group (some are even more effective when used by group members). Every individual group member has a duty to aid the proper functioning of the group and a commitment to its decisions. The chair or leader is not the sole person who shoulders that responsibility.

Many groups can avoid or reduce the likelihood of many conflictive situations by adopting certain procedures as standard:

- Establish climate for sharing: Arrange for comfort of participants, provide nametags, arrange seating for all to see each other, allow everyone the opportunity to speak, protect the rights of individuals to have dissenting opinions and to change their opinions.
- Explain ground rules: Let group members know what you expect of them, check their acceptance of the rules.
- Set goal(s): Develop goal(s) with group and refer to them often.
- Reveal agenda: Announce items to be covered as well as the structure and process of the meeting. If practical, allow group members to participate in setting the agenda.
- Be task-oriented: Focus on the task rather than personalities.
- Let everyone be heard: Acknowledge all ideas; not all ideas must be judged, but they must be heard.

Experiment. Use good judgment. Have productive meetings!

Behavior	Possible Motivations	Possible Actions for Leader
Argumentative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Naturally combative</li> <li>• Having a bad day</li> <li>• His/her needs not being addressed</li> <li>• Devil’s advocate</li> <li>• Is annoyed with one or more group members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restate views so individual knows he/she has been heard clearly.</li> <li>• Be fair. Give all persons a chance to express opinions.</li> <li>• Restate task and time limitation.</li> <li>• Designate a later time when subject can be discussed more fully.</li> <li>• Find points arguing sides have in common.</li> <li>• Control your own temper and try to keep group members from getting overly excited.</li> <li>• Do a Force-field Analysis (list positive and negative forces for the suggestions).</li> <li>• Encourage group to respond to arguments.</li> <li>• If all else fails, discuss privately with individual at break.</li> </ul>
Asking leader’s opinion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is simply looking for leader’s advice or direction</li> <li>• Is trying to get leader to support one side</li> <li>• Is trying to put leader on the spot</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarify initially what your role is: chair, president, facilitator, trainer, or other.</li> <li>• Avoid being solver of group’s problems; help group make its own decisions.</li> <li>• Do not take sides.</li> <li>• Acknowledge that your personal view is relatively unimportant compared to view of the group members in total.</li> <li>• Delay giving an answer: “First let’s hear some other options.” Or “I feel it would be inappropriate to give my personal opinion at this time.”</li> <li>• “Let’s hear what group members have to say.”</li> <li>• Give a direct answer; there are times you should.</li> </ul>
Definitely wrong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has not heard previous discussion</li> <li>• Has not understood previous discussion</li> <li>• Did not do homework</li> <li>• Is misinformed</li> <li>• Is not logical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Handle with care</li> <li>• “Let’s check the facts.”</li> <li>• “That’s a possibility.” Or “That’s one way of looking at it.”</li> <li>• “I see your point. How can we equate that with this?”</li> <li>• Question the individual.</li> <li>• Allow group to answer him/her.</li> <li>• Ignore the misstatement; the group may not wish to draw attention to it.</li> <li>• State honestly that you do not agree.</li> </ul>
Digressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misunderstands task</li> <li>• Is preoccupied with another issue</li> <li>• Enjoys being center of attention</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accept blame. “Perhaps I was unclear.”</li> <li>• Acknowledge that the individual’s topic is important and can be discussed at another time (specify time if possible).</li> <li>• Remind digresser that “We really <u>must</u> stay on track” if she/he persists.</li> </ul>

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Griping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has pet peeve</li> <li>• Enjoys scrapping</li> <li>• Is having a bad day</li> <li>• Has legitimate complaint</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let him/her know that gripe has been heard (perhaps even acknowledge agreement); direct group forward.</li> <li>• Acknowledge you appreciate assessment of problems and negative forces; direct group to seek <u>solutions</u> to these.</li> <li>• Record complaint and assure individual that it will be considered.</li> <li>• Indicate that you will discuss problem with him/her privately, later.</li> <li>• Allow group to handle her/him.</li> <li>• Indicate time is short; remaining time should be used for finding solutions.</li> </ul>
Holding side conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finds group session not responsive to needs</li> <li>• Is uncomfortable talking to entire group</li> <li>• Wants to catch up on personal information</li> <li>• Has need to communicate important information to another individual</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comment that generally you find that it is more satisfactory if only one person talks at a time.</li> <li>• Ask if it would be helpful to have some smaller “buzz” sessions for a few minutes and then report to the whole group.</li> <li>• Suggest that if it is necessary to communicate during meetings that they write notes to that conversations will not distract others.</li> <li>• Assume that whatever is being said is important. “It would be beneficial if we could all hear what every member is saying.”</li> <li>• Call one side-talker by name, asking her/him an easy question.</li> <li>• Walk toward and stand near those members who are talking.</li> <li>• Give side-talker a job (taking minutes, recording ideas on newsprint).</li> <li>• Avoid embarrassing the offenders unless all else fails.</li> </ul>
Inarticulate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lacks ability to put thoughts into words</li> <li>• Lacks experience of putting thoughts into words</li> <li>• Is surrounded by very articulate persons, emphasizing her/his problem.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use patience and judgment. Patience is needed to hold individual’s interest; judgment to keep group alert and interested.</li> <li>• Avoid phrase “What you mean is...”.</li> <li>• “Let me repeat that.” Or “Let me see if I understand.” Then repeat his/her thoughts. (This is an effective technique – used with both the articulate and the inarticulate – for summarizing and checking your understanding.)</li> <li>• Avoid changing individual’s ideas, just adjust words so they make more sense; check with individual to be certain that your restatement is acceptable.</li> </ul>

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Obstinate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not want to change a prejudgment</li> <li>• Does not identify with group goal</li> <li>• Feels ownership of an idea or project not felt by group</li> <li>• Has misunderstood or not heard others</li> <li>• Is having a bad day</li> <li>• Is naturally stubborn</li> <li>• Does not feel part of group</li> <li>• Has not had opportunity to explain reasons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be certain he/she is heard.</li> <li>• State or restate group goal.</li> <li>• Do not argue.</li> <li>• Search for solution acceptable to all, using problem-solving method and consensus.</li> <li>• Restate and/or record individual's ideas.</li> <li>• Allow group to decide to eliminate the individual's idea.</li> <li>• Acknowledge that group must make group decisions. Set time limit on discussion. Then insist the idea die.</li> <li>• Say that time is short; you'll be glad to discuss it later.</li> <li>• Ask individual to accept group viewpoint for the moment; later there may be time to explore her/his viewpoint more fully.</li> </ul>
On wrong subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misunderstands the subject or assignment</li> <li>• Did not hear the addenda item</li> <li>• Was not paying attention</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accept blame: "something I said must have led you off the subject; this is what we should be discussing..."</li> <li>• Have subject or agenda in writing – on newsprint, blackboard, or individual sheets.</li> <li>• Remind individual or group as a whole what the proper subject is.</li> <li>• Interrupt and reclarify the subject.</li> </ul>
Overly talkative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is eager-beaver</li> <li>• Enjoys showing off</li> <li>• Likes being the center of attention</li> <li>• Is exceptionally well informed and anxious to share</li> <li>• Is just naturally garrulous</li> <li>• Shows enthusiasm by talking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arrange for everyone to contribute; proper structuring can curtail the long-winded.</li> <li>• Let individual know he/she has been heard.</li> <li>• Limit the time each individual may speak.</li> <li>• Ask for responses to him/her from the group.</li> <li>• Interrupt, stressing time and task.</li> <li>• "That's an interesting point...Let's see what the group thinks about it."</li> <li>• Say to the group at the beginning of the session that we should all keep our comments brief.</li> <li>• Use individual for summarizing.</li> <li>• Give her/him a job (taking minutes, recording ideas on newsprint).</li> </ul>

Behavior	Possible Motivations	Possible Actions for Leader
Personality clash	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not like one or several group members</li> <li>• Enjoys being divisive</li> <li>• Wishes to embarrass or hurt another or others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on group goal or problem to be solved, not on personalities.</li> <li>• Ask that personalities <u>not</u> be brought into discussion; turn to task.</li> <li>• Allow points of disagreement to surface so that they can be dealt with effectively (diverting attention from personalities).</li> <li>• Emphasize points of agreement; minimize points of disagreement.</li> <li>• Seat two clashing members <u>beside</u> each other, not across from each other. (It is harder to argue with someone close at your side.)</li> <li>• Organize some activity that will allow clashing individuals to share their feelings, either to one another or to the whole group.</li> <li>• Brainstorm alternative suggestions for dealing with the issue, allowing group as a whole to focus on goal.</li> <li>• Bring an objective member into the discussion.</li> <li>• Emphasize common goal and ask how each relates to it.</li> <li>• Request members stop arguing.</li> <li>• Give an "I" message: "I feel very unhappy when I hear such unkind remarks."</li> </ul>
Quick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wants to be helpful</li> <li>• Knows the answers and wants to express them</li> <li>• May or may not want to exclude others from participating; result is the same</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Question others, calling them by name.</li> <li>• Give the individual a job (taking minutes or recording ideas on newsprint).</li> <li>• Thank the individual and ask group if there are others who would like to help.</li> <li>• Use the individual to summarize</li> </ul>

Behavior	Possible Motivations	Possible Actions for Leader
Quiet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is bored</li> <li>• Feels superior</li> <li>• Is timid</li> <li>• Feels uncomfortable with group</li> <li>• Is indifferent</li> <li>• Is preoccupied</li> <li>• Is having a bad day</li> <li>• Prefers to listen</li> <li>• Is naturally quiet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell group you want everyone who wishes to speak to have that opportunity.</li> <li>• Value the contributions of all members and protect members from being “put down.” (Such a climate will invite the timid to speak.)</li> <li>• “Is there anyone who wishes to speak who has not had the opportunity?” (This will keep the frequent speakers silent and give an opening to the quiet ones.)</li> <li>• Make the climate conducive to having all group members express themselves.</li> <li>• Use caution about singling out a timid individual for an opinion; she/he may not have one.</li> <li>• Say directly to the individual, “We would like to hear your viewpoint, too.”</li> <li>• All, encourage, but do not insist the individual speak (everyone has the right to not participate).</li> <li>• Permit him/her the privilege to simply listen.</li> </ul>
Rambling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is preoccupied with own interests</li> <li>• Is not aware or of interested in group goal</li> <li>• Does not understand group goal</li> <li>• Likes to talk</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set group goals initially; fall back on these goals to keep everyone, especially the rambler, on target.</li> <li>• Thank individual and refocus attention by restating relevant points. Move on to another, specific individual.</li> <li>• Remind individual and group as a whole that time is limited.</li> <li>• Use technique of limiting comments to two minutes.</li> <li>• Question rambler, directing him/her to the subject and task.</li> <li>• Stress time, task, and structure.</li> </ul>