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DIFFICULT PEOPLE: SAVVY MEETING TIPS

By Meredith O'Connor

If you have difficult people in your meetings, how can you manage them more effectively? What are the best strategies for dealing with people who are argumentative, disruptive, negative or just not contributing?

The first step is to recognize how important it is to deal with the problem. Difficult people will upset the balance of the meeting, kill the momentum, de-motivate people and keep you from accomplishing critical tasks.

There's a big difference between people who participate in a lively discussion, challenge conventional thinking and contribute to the idea pool – and those who go negative, make it personal and create bad feelings. Positive conflict happens when a group of bright, motivated people get together to brainstorm – that's healthy for an organization. As the leader of the group, you want to encourage that – ask people for their opinions and get the best stuff on the table.

What if you don't have that positive energy flowing through your meetings? What if everyone leaves your meetings feeling frustrated and deflated? How can you change the dynamic?

Here are a few tips from ***Speak Like a CEO*** that will help you get your meetings back on the right foot.

Tips on promoting positive conflict:

- Create a safe, open environment where people can speak their minds
- Encourage all participants to speak up, and don't let anyone dominate
- Use decision devices such as pros/cons, evaluation sheets, grids to evaluate ideas
- Set the ground rules for your meetings and enforce them

Tips on managing negative conflict:

- Listen to conflicting views
- Identify common goals between participants
- Build on agreements you already have as you try to resolve differences
- Avoid placing blame and making accusations
- Depersonalize through your own words – it's not about the person, it's about the resolution of a problem or challenge
- Look for a win/win so that everyone feels they have contributed
- Communicate respect to everyone at all times
- Use a positive tone even if others are going negative
- If conflict persists, take the issue offline and talk about it after the meeting
- Zero tolerance for personal attacks – never allow it to happen, stop it when it does

Following these guidelines can help encourage a healthy meeting environment.

As a meeting leader, your job is to lead. Everyone else in the room expects you to step up and manage the difficult people. In fact, if there are disruptions, or if a meeting goes negative, people will often blame the person leading the meeting.

Here's a profile of types of people who can disrupt a meeting. Take a minute to review these to see if the descriptions match "difficult people" in your organization.

- **People Who Argue** - Although debate and controversy are usually healthy for organizations, some people push it; they argue miniscule points, don't see others' views, or don't understand the value of compromise. They may be angry, feel misunderstood, or enjoy challenging a leader. They often don't know how much they irritate others, and how they are perceived.
- **People Who Dominate** - People who dominate have similar traits; they may also be poor listeners, or talkative people, or they may have an agenda. They go on and on, to show-off or demonstrate superior knowledge or ability. They are unaware of the purpose – to generate many ideas, allow participation, build consensus. They are also unaware of the effect they have on others and sometimes may be rewarded for this behavior.
- **People Who Have Side Meetings** - People who are talking during the meeting may have an emergency, but often they are bored. This may be because you have spent too much time on the topic, or because they are self-important, rude and unaware of the effect of their behavior on others. You can't have an effective meeting when there are other meetings going on.

How do you keep these types of people from disrupting your meetings? First, recognize the type of person you are dealing with. Then, think strategically. Try employing these techniques to get them to change their behaviors:

People Who Argue

- Prevent by having a pre-meeting discussion
- Intervene by confronting the argument
- Draw out objection with question
- Turn it over to the group to judge
- Point out the negative impact
- Keep it professional, not personal

People Who Dominate

- Enforce time limits and ground rules
- Prevent by pre-meeting discussion
- Intervene by asking questions of others
- Avoid recognizing the dominator
- Look for a place to break-in
- Thank them for their contribution
- Ask for other opinions

People Who Have Side Meetings

- Discuss privately after meeting
- Glance in their direction
- If that fails, walk near them
- Or, go quiet, stop the meeting
- Let them finish their conversation
- Ask their opinion about topic
- Sit next to them

If you recognize the different ways people can disturb a meeting, you'll be ready to handle them appropriately. Follow these tips and you'll be one step closer to becoming an A+ meeting leader.