Dealing With Disruptive Participants

* Aim your intervention at the **behavior** and **consequences**, **not** at the **person**.
* The same principle applies for groups and individuals.
* The intention isn’t to apportion blame, it’s to **resolve** the problem**.**

Here are some suggestions as to how to handle different situations. Every situation should be analysed and the learner involved should be considered. No two situations can ever be handled in the same way.

**COPING STRATEGY:**

* Assess the situation – keep yourself and other students safe (may need security to intervene).
* Ignore negative or non-damaging behavior.
* Don’t add to the angst - remain calm – don’t argue with the other person or make accusations, be discreet.
* Don’t issue ultimatums.
* Stop wishing the Difficult Person were different.
* Use your *listening skills* to check your understanding of the situation.
* Refer to group rules set up at the beginning of the session – what behavior will or will not be accepted and don’t let yourself be pushed beyond this limit.
* Be persistent and consistent in your response, which conveys to the difficult person that you mean what you say.
* Provide an opportunity for time out or a private chat.
* Believe in yourself and your ability to deal with others.
* Look for ways to reduce the causes of the behavior.
* Monitor the effectiveness of your coping strategy, modifying it where appropriate.
* Assess the impact on others. Seek advice if necessary.

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| **ACTION** | **POSSIBLE REASONS** | **WHAT TO DO** |
| **Participant is:**  Overly talkative – to the extent that other participants do not have an opportunity to contribute. | **Participant may be:**   * an “eager beaver”; * exceptionally well informed; * naturally wordy; * nervous. | Interrupt with “That’s an interesting point…Let’s see what everyone else thinks.”   * Directly call on others. * Suggest “Let’s put others to work.” * When the person stops for a breath, thank him or her, restate pertinent points and move on. |
| Argumentative – to the extent that others’ ideas or opinions are rejected or others are treated unfairly. | seriously upset about the issue under discussion;   * upset by personal or job problems; * intolerant of others; * lacking in empathy; * a negative thinker. | Keep your temper in check.   * Try to find some merit in what’s being said; get group to see it too, then move on to something else. * Talk to the person privately and point out what their actions are doing to the rest of the group. * Try to gain the person’s co-operation. * Encourage the person to concentrate on positives, not negatives. |
| Engaging in side conversations with others in the group. | talking about something related to the discussion;   * discussing a personal matter; * uninterested in the topic under discussion. | Direct a question to the person.   * Restate the last idea or suggestion expressed by the group, and ask for the person’s opinion. |
| **ACTION** | **POSSIBLE REASONS** | **WHAT TO DO** |
| Unable to express self so that everyone understands. | * nervous, shy, excited; * not used to participating in discussions. | - Rephrase, restating what the person said, asking for confirmation of accuracy.  - Allow person ample time to express self.  - Help person along without being condescending. |
| Always seeking approval. | * looking for advice; * trying to get leader to support his or her point of view; * trying to put leader on the spot. | - Avoid taking sides, especially if the group will be unduly influenced by your point of view. |
| Bickering with another participant. | * carrying on an old grudge; * feeling very strongly about the issue. | * Emphasise points of agreement, minimise points of disagreement. * Direct participants’ attention to the objectives of the session. * Mention time limits of the session. * Ask participants to shelve the issue for the moment. |
| Uninvolved and unwilling to commit to new tasks. | * lazy; * too busy already; * feel they should not have been made to attend the session in the first place. * unaware of own skills and abilities; | Ask the person to volunteer for tasks (others in group must as well).   * Clearly explain the purpose of the training and the benefits to individuals and the organization. * Identify how the outcomes can be applied in the workplace.   - Privately ask why the person won’t become involved and is unwilling to commit to new tasks. - Provide constructive feedback and provide reassurance and encouragement. |

Dealing with difficult behavior can be emotionally tiring. Caring for yourself during this time is vital to the effective management of the situation.

* Recognize the effect an interaction has on you
* Allow yourself recovery time
* Be aware of things that help you to recover effectively and quickly
* Be available to support others who may have been through a difficult interaction where possible
* Access other helping agencies/support available to you

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| **Learner Response** | **Trainer Action** |
| *When a learner asks a question that the trainer is unable to answer immediately.* | Trainer must admit that they do not know the answer or is not sure. This will engender respect. The trainer must endeavour to get back to the learner as soon as possible with the information or explanation. If it is not possible to quickly find an explanation or information, the trainer must still contact the learner and inform him/her of the difficulties. |
| *When the learner disagrees with the trainer, challenges the trainer or heckles the trainer.* | The trainer must remain calm and not get involved in an argument and waste the remaining learners time. The “difficult learner” must be requested to speak to the trainer during a break. Find out what the **learner**’s problem is, and try to gain his/her cooperation. If the “difficult learner” refuses or continues, the trainer is within their rights to ask him/her to leave. |
| *A learner volunteers incorrect information or incorrectly answers a question.* | The trainer must acknowledge the contribution but must not say that it is wrong. A response could begin with the words: “I have never experienced it that way, but …” or “That is a different way of looking at the situation, and …” |
| *A learner volunteers correct information or correctly answers a question.* | Praise the learner and add more relevant information. |
| *When a learner monopolises the session or always answers the question.* | Acknowledge the contributions, but suggest to the learner that the group could learn from different points of view. If the person continues, quietly speak to him/her alone during a break. |
| *A learner gets side-tracked.* | Stop the learner before he/she wastes too much time. Interrupt with words, e.g. “thank you for your interesting input, we could possibly continue this discussion this later if there is time…” then reinstate the topic and continue. |
| *A learner is obviously bored and disinterested. This will be obvious if he/she doodles, reads or occupies him/herself and is obviously not on track with the group.* | Involve the person by directly asking for a contribution. Speak to the person during a break and find the reason for the person’s disinterest and try to rectify it. |
| *A learner tells the trainer at the outset that he/she is present purely because he/she has to be.* | Ask the learner what he/she is expecting of the course and try to convince the person that the training will be of use. Offer the person the option of not attending if he/she cannot be convinced. |
| *Two learners become involved in an argument.* | The trainer must emphasis points of agreement, minimise the points of disagreement, or ask that they are kept out of the training session. |
| *Learners hold whispered private conversations.* | Do not embarrass the learners. Ask one of them a direct question, or ask one of them to comment on what you have just said. |
| *A learner has difficulty in expressing himself.* | Repeat what he/she has said starting with the words: “Correct me if I am wrong, but you are saying…” |

**Getting People Involved**

Learners might not become involved because they are shy, introverted, scared that they might give the wrong answer and be ridiculed, or simply do not the answer. If people do not become involved, they will become disinterested, they will become bored and withdrawn. If they are not involved, they will not learn. The following bullet point list provides some ways a trainer is able to get people involved.

* Creating environment of trust, friendliness and helpfulness.
* Being open-minded.
* Carefully listening to learners.
* Not criticizing any efforts.
* Being aware of non-verbal cues and acting on them.
* Asking for input on their experiences.
* Asking easier questions of those not involved.
* Asking for input on their own experiences.
* Counting to 10 after a question has been asked. Only then is it feasible to ask a second question, to restate the question, answer the question or moving on. By allowing time, you will show that you value even silent and thoughtful participation and that you consider those that need more thinking time.
* Being an enthusiastic trainer.
* Making eye-contact with the audience.
* Letting people work in groups, since it is easier to communicate with smaller, intimate groups.
* Using role-play, and other varied techniques. Be careful not to further embarrass the shy ones, however.
* Giving instructions on note taking that can be used during the training.
* Planning for the participants to get to know one another by means of ice breakers etc.
* Asking questions of the group in general, or questions that can be answered by a show of hands, e.g. “How many of you have worked with a matching and reconciliation tool before?”.