

Managing Monsters In Meetings: How To Stop Unproductive Behavior

by Steve Kaye, Ph.D.



It happens easily. You're conducting a meeting and suddenly a small meeting starts on the side. Then someone introduces an unrelated issue. Someone else ridicules the new issue. Everyone laughs, except the person who mentioned the idea. Then someone insults the person who told the joke. Two people stand up and walk out. Others complain the meeting is a waste of time.

Now, what do you do?

Here are easy ways to deal with common disruptions in meetings. In general, all of these approaches are based on the following principles.

- **Respect other people.** Behavior that offends you may seem appropriate to the other person. You can always learn more about a situation and about someone's motives. Thus, approach every disruption carefully, as if you need further understanding to resolve it.
- **Focus on behavior.** Your goal is to hold an effective meeting — not teach lessons. If you attempt to punish people, through admonitions, ridicule or threats, you will make

enemies and lose credibility. In the short term, that can ruin the effectiveness of your meeting, and in the long term it can ruin your career.

➤ **Apply diplomatic courage.** Leaders project strength and confidence; losers project negativity and fear. Detach from uncomfortable behavior, realizing it is simply something the other person is doing. Assume there is no personal intent to damage you.

Knowing these principles is useful because then you can invent approaches to other types of disruptions. Here are various situations that may occur and how to handle each during the course of your meetings.

Multiple Conversations

Side conversations ruin meetings by destroying focus and fragmenting participation.

Approach 1: Ask for cooperation.

— Start by asking everyone to cooperate. Look at the middle of the group (instead of at the talker) and say:

- ❖ “Excuse me (pause to gain everyone’s attention). I know all of your ideas are important. So, please let’s have one speaker at a time.”
- ❖ “Excuse me. I’m having difficulty hearing what [contributing participant] is saying.”
- ❖ “There seems to be a great deal of interest for this issue. Could we have just one speaker at a time please?”

These statements diplomatically acknowledge that a side conversation is occurring without naming the participants or putting them on the spot. Hostile statements, such as: "Hey you! Stop that!" will create hard feelings that undermine your effectiveness as a leader.

Approach 2: Change the process

If side conversations continue, change the rules to make cooperation more convenient. For example, you could use a speaking prop.

A speaking prop is an object that entitles the holder to speak. When the person finishes speaking, the prop is passed on to the next person who wants to speak. Possible props include a gavel, paper cup or any toy. If you are working on a controversial issue, select a soft object, such as a teddy bear or foam ball. It reduces stress and potential injury (if thrown).

Introduce the new process by saying: "We seem to have a lot of enthusiasm for this issue. So, let's decide that only the person holding the gavel (cup, teddy bear, foam ball) may speak. Is that okay?"

Notice this statement begins with a complimentary acknowledgment of the situation (multiple conversations) followed by a suggestion and ends with a request for cooperation.

Another process that facilitates equal participation is the balanced dialogue. In this process each participant receives an equal, measured time to speak. I frequently use times ranging from 30 seconds to two minutes. Suggest using this process by saying:

- ❖ "It seems everyone wants to talk about this issue. So let's make sure everyone has a chance to be heard by using a balanced dialogue. I recommend we give each person a minute to state their views. Is that okay?"

Drifting From The Topic

Although new ideas lead to creative solutions, they can be a challenge when they interrupt or distract the work on an issue.

Approach 1: Question the relationship to topic

When new ideas seem inappropriate, say:

- ❖ “That’s an interesting point (or question). And how does it relate to our topic?”
- ❖ “Excuse me. We started talking about our budget and now we seem to be discussing payroll administration. Is this what we want to work on?”
- ❖ “We seem to be working on a new issue. I’m sure this is important and I wonder what you want to work on with the time we have left?”

These statements greet the ideas with compliments and requests for clarification. This recognizes that the other person could believe the idea relates to the topic, which it may.

Approach 2: Place in the idea bin

Use an Idea Bin to manage unrelated ideas. This powerful tool is a blank chart page posted on the wall with the title, Idea Bin. Some groups call it an Issue Bin or Parking Lot. The scribe writes new ideas on this chart page or the participants write their ideas on Post-it Notes that they place on the page. Direct new ideas to the Idea Bin by saying:

- ❖ “That’s a great idea. Could you put it in the Idea Bin?”

When you plan the agenda, leave time at the end of the meeting to check the Idea Bin. You will find that many of the new ideas were resolved during the meeting. If possible, deal with the remaining ideas that have merit or place them on future agendas.

Quiet Participants

There are many reasons why someone would decline to participate during a meeting. While some of these may be valid, others may warrant intervention in order to hold an effective meeting.

Approach 1: Encourage participation

When you notice a quiet participant, ask for contributions by looking at the person and saying:

- ❖ “How do you feel about that, Chris?”
- ❖ “What results do you expect from this, Pat?”
- ❖ “Chris, how will this affect you?”

Sometimes a quiet participant will test the environment with a tentative reply or a minor, safe point. Respond positively and with encouragement to any response that you receive. Then probe further to explore for more ideas.

Sometimes you can encourage quiet participants to contribute by making direct eye contact, pausing, and letting your expression say, “What do you think?”

Approach 2: Change the process

Use a balanced dialogue or sequential participation (a round robin) to collect ideas. Both of these processes provide quiet participants with opportunities to speak.

Dominant Participants

While dominant participants contribute significantly to the success of a meeting, they can also overwhelm, intimidate and exclude others. Thus, you want to control their energy without losing their support.

Approach 1: Ask others to contribute

Asking quiet participants to contribute indirectly moderates the more dominant participants. Say:

❖ "Before we continue, I want to hear from the rest of the group."

❖ "This is great. And I wonder what else we could do."
(Look at the quiet participants when you say this.)

Approach 2: Change the process

A balanced dialogue equalizes participation and sequential participation (a round robin) prevents anyone from dominating the discussion.

Approach 3: Include them in the process

Ask dominant participants for their support during the meeting. Meet with the person privately and say:

- ❖ “I need your help with something. It’s clear to me you know a great deal about this issue and have many good ideas. I also want to hear what other people in the meeting have to say. So, I wonder if you could hold back a little, to let others contribute.”

You can also retain control by giving away minor tasks. For example, dominant participants make excellent helpers. They can distribute materials, run errands, serve as scribes, deliver messages, post chart papers, run demonstration units, operate projectors, change overhead transparencies, act as greeters and in general perform any logistical task related to the meeting.

Approach 4: Create barriers

Simply move away from the more aggressive participants and make less eye contact. If you are unable to see them, you are unable to recognize them as the next speaker.

Use this approach with moderation and support it with complimentary requests for assistance. Ignoring someone conveys disapproval, which could change a potential ally into an adversary.

Approach 5: One point at a time

Sometimes dominant participants will control a discussion by listing many points in a single statement. They cite every challenge, condition and consideration known, which completely clogs everyone else’s thinking. End this by asking participants to state only one point at a time, after which someone else speaks. It is very difficult to monopolize a discussion when this technique prevails.

Quiet participants often hope to be ignored; dominant participants want to be noticed. A quiet person may feel overbearing after making two statements in an hour. A

dominant participant may feel left out after contributing only 95% of the ideas. You will be most successful moderating dominant participants by building bridges between what they want and what you need.

Deadlocked Discussions

Although a meeting is a vehicle for resolving differences, it can break down when the participants become mired in a disagreement.

Approach 1: Form a subcommittee

Ask for volunteers from the opposing viewpoints to form a subcommittee to resolve the issue. This is a useful approach, because:

- ❖ The issue may require extensive research, which is best completed outside the meeting.
- ❖ The people who caused the deadlock will be responsible for solving it.
- ❖ The effort to resolve the issue will test its priority. That is, if no one wants to spend time finding a solution, then perhaps the issue (or at least the controversy) is unimportant.

Ask for a subcommittee by saying:

- ❖ "There seem to be concerns about this issue. Rather than use everyone's time in the meeting, I want a subcommittee to resolve this and report back to us. Who wants to be on it?"

Approach 2: Ask for an analysis

If a minority obstructs resolution, ask them to analyze the issue and propose alternatives. You can say:

- ❖ “You seem to view this issue differently. Could you help us understand your position by preparing an analysis of the issue with workable alternatives?”

As with a subcommittee, this approach will either uncover essential considerations or test commitment. In either case, it moves the deadlock out of the meeting so you can proceed.

Filibuster

Sometimes, someone will launch into a seemingly endless monologue.

Approach 1: Interrupt with “excuse me”

Use the words “excuse me” as a wedge to interrupt. It is important that you say “Excuse me” with polite sincerity. For example, you could say:

- ❖ “Excuse me, this seems interesting and I wonder if you could tell me how it relates to our meeting.”
- ❖ “Excuse me, I’m sure this is very important and since we have only five minutes left for this issue, I wonder if you could summarize your main point.”

Personal Attacks

Personal attacks hurt people, mar communication and end creativity. If they become part of a meeting’s culture, they drive the participants into making safe and perhaps useless contributions.

Approach 1: Speak to the group

Set the stage for the group to enforce its culture by making a general comment. Look at the middle of the group and say:

- ❖ “Just a moment. Let’s pause here to calm down. I can tell we’re upset about this. And we want to find a fair solution for everyone.” (Take slow deep breaths and relax to model calming down.)

After saying this, pause a moment to let the group respond. Often, someone else will support your request. Then continue as if everything were normal.

Avoid looking at the attacker when speaking to the group. Making eye contact acknowledges and returns power to the attacker.

Approach 2: Explore for the cause

Sometimes people throw insults from behind a fence of presumed safety. You can disrupt this illusion by saying:

- ❖ “Chris, you seem upset with that.”
- ❖ “Pat, you seem to disagree.”
- ❖ “You seem to have reservations about this.”

I realize these statements may sound like naive responses to an insult. However, such understated responses improve the situation because they sound less threatening, feel easier to deliver and preserve the other person’s self-esteem. Realize the attacker may have viewed the attack less seriously than it sounded.

TAS