

Title:

Monsters in Meetings - Part 1, How to Manage Unproductive Behavior

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563

Summary:

Everyone complains about bad meetings and how they waste everyone's time. Here are five general strategies to make sure that you hold an effective meeting, even when unproductive behavior threatens to ruin it. (This is the first of a seven part article on Managing Monsters in Meetings.)

Keywords:

effective meetings, bad meetings, business meeting, monsters in meetings, problem participants, facilitation, steve kaye, facilitator, leadership, one great meeting

Article Body:

It happens easily.

You're conducting a meeting and suddenly a small side meeting starts. Then two side meetings develop. Soon you have many meetings going at once, and all of them are out of control.

Or maybe 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 that the meeting is a waste of time.

So, how do you prevent things like this from happening?

Or how do you bring your meeting back on track?

Let's begin with basic strategies for dealing with unproductive behavior in meetings.

Respect other people.

Always treat others with respect, even if they are doing things that seem wrong. Their "bad" behavior could be based on many things, such as a lack of skill, a misunderstanding, or a response to a threat. It could also be a simple mistake. Or maybe they're expressing an indirect warning, complaint, or cry of pain. If

you respond with disrespect, such as with a counterattack, you will make a bad situation worse. They will either retreat, which means they stop contributing to your meeting, or they will retaliate, which can escalate to an argument that ruins your meeting.

Ask questions.

Use questions to find out what is really happening. For example, if someone introduces a new issue, respond by saying, "That sounds interesting, and I wonder how that relates to what we are working on." Notice that this is a neutral, gentle question. It is not a trick question like, "What are you trying to do, ruin my meeting?" and it is not a command like, "Hey, stick to the topic." Hostile responses are bad because they put the other person in an awkward position, which always ruins cooperation.

Focus on the 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. In the short term, that can ruin the effectiveness of your meeting, and in the long term it can ruin your career. So, when unproductive behavior appears in your meeting, talk about the behavior. For example, if a side conversation starts, you could say, "We seem to have more than one meeting going on now, and that's preventing us from working on the budget."

Apply diplomatic courage.

Leaders project strength and confidence; losers project negativity and fear. Detach from the behavior that seems bothersome, realizing it is simply something that the other person is doing. Assume that there is no personal intent to hurt you. Just talk about what is happening and ask for what you want to happen as shown in the above paragraph.

Show what you expect.

Be a model of effective meeting behavior. If it is your meeting, or if you hold a leadership role in your organization, realize that others regard you as the standard for their actions. If you arrive on time for meetings, others will interpret this to mean that they should come to your meetings on time. If you make positive, appropriate contributions in meetings, others will infer that this is what you expect from them.

Apply these strategies to make your meetings effective.

This is the first of a seven part article on Managing Monsters in Meetings.