

Title:

Monsters in Meetings - Part 7, Personal Attacks

Word Count:

555

Summary:

An effective meeting depends upon the participants treating each other with respect. Here's how to respond if someone insults another participant. (This is the seventh 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:

You remember these people for the wrong reasons.

They are the monsters who hurt others with insults, ridicule, and sarcasm. They bully. They threaten. They attack.

And that ruins your meeting.

Personal attacks are unacceptable because if one person is being hurt in your meeting, everyone else feels it. As a result, the participants retreat into making safe and generally useless contributions.

So, how do you respond to attacks?

First, take a big breath. Grab your courage. And then use one of the following approaches.

Approach 1: Speak to the group

Respond to a hostile remark 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 an illusion of presumed distance. You can respond by calling for an explanation. In this case say:

"Pat, you seem upset with that."

"Tony, 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.

These statements also transfer the focus from the target to the attacker's feelings. And this is what you need to talk about in order to resolve the dispute.

After you speak wait for the attacker to talk about what caused the attack.

If the attacker continues with hostile remarks, interrupt with:

"Excuse me, we need to respect each other. And I wonder what makes you feel upset over this."

"Excuse me, we heard that. Now, what makes you feel that way?"

"Excuse me, I'm interested in hearing what your concerns are."

Approach 3: Call a break

If the first two approaches fail to end the attacks, then call a break or end the meeting. This will give you a chance to meet privately with the attacker,

rewrite the agenda, rebuild communication, and (if appropriate) schedule another meeting without the attacker.

You could say,

"We seem to be at an impasse. I want to take a break so we can calm down."

"This hostility makes it impossible to get any work done. So, I'm adjourning the meetings. We'll work on this later and then reconvene at another time."

"We need to work on this outside of the meeting. So let's adjourn."

Note that some people use anger to intimidate others into cooperating with them. If you adjourn the meeting, you will have to meet with the attacker to resolve the conflict.

Meetings are a forum for finding solutions, making decisions, and reaching agreements. When you apply these approaches to disruptions, you will maintain the productive environment necessary to accomplish your goals.

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