

# Coping with Meeting Disrupters

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## COPING WITH MEETING DISRUPTERS

There are several common difficult behavior patterns that are demonstrated at meetings. Here are a few with suggestions on actions to take to alleviate the problem the behavior presents.

1. There are those who like to ask questions which may or may not be appropriate. This can stem from real curiosity, a desire to help the group by recounting a previous experience, or just wanting attention. Listen but set a time limit. If the question is pertinent, it could set off a good discussion. An alternative is to state upfront that questions will be taken at the end of the report or presentation. Sometimes giving the people the job of recording the ideas keeps them too occupied to interrupt.
2. Someone who argues or complains may be motivated by a feeling that their needs are not being addressed, is annoyed with someone in the group, is having a bad day, or is perhaps naturally combative. It may be best to let the person express his or her opinion and then restate the viewpoint to ensure clarity. Tell that person that the matter can be discussed more fully later. If the complaint is legitimate to the topic, list positive and negative forces involved. Encourage the group to respond as well.
3. Dominators may work from a base of wanting to show off or demonstrate how well informed they are. The leader should remind the group to keep comments concise, clear, and focused. Proper structuring ensures that all members participate. The competitor wants to win every point whether or not the argument is any good. Remind this speaker that he or she can't always be right and that other comments also deserve to be heard.
4. Ramblers tend to be preoccupied with their own interests and are either unaware of or uninterested in the goals of the group. It is important to validate the person's comments but redirect them to the subject and task. Digressers may misunderstand a task or seem distracted by another issue. If clarification is in order, do it quickly so as not to frustrate other members of the group. Otherwise, just acknowledge the comment and move on.
5. We've all been frustrated by others who hold private side conversations. They may be sharing their reaction or viewpoint, discussing a matter not related to that meeting, or catching up on personal news. Solutions? Separate the talkers, ask them to include everyone in the conversation, direct a specific question regarding the topic at one of them, or make the person the recorder. Another great tactic is to stop the meeting and be silent - this

should embarrass the talkers into stopping. A tactful technique is to ask that only one person speak at a time as that leads to easier listening and better group dynamics.

6. The joker can lighten up a dreary meeting with a little levity. But some individuals go overboard. Then there is the sarcastic one, the person who can't resist a snide remark. A bad tone for the meeting ensues as this person belittles what others say. Cut the tirade by stating that such remarks be withheld during the meeting.

7. The objector likes to remind co-workers that it's been done before with no success or that the idea has little merit and probably wouldn't work. This can stem from lack of knowledge or understanding, fear of change, or laziness. Another problem is the person who tries to form a coalition to pressure the group to accept and back him or her and what they think would be a better way. If you can't get these people to be a more constructive part of the team, don't invite them to future meetings.

While it is the leaders responsibility to keep the group focused on the meeting topic, help is usually given by the rest of the participants via pointed comments or looks. Meeting disrupters don't have to be tolerated; politely challenge their behavior and get back on track. After all, most of us don't enjoy spending much time in meetings and the sooner we get back to "real work", the happier we are.

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