

Managing people with too much to say - and helping others have their's!

Seven easy tips on
facilitating group
involvement

Giving everyone a fair go

Being a facilitator isn't always easy. There's numerous opinions on how to manage participants in workshops. The reality for many of us is that we need to be able to give everyone in the 'workshop' a fair go - the chance to have their say. One of my favourite quotes regarding dealing with others came from an old and distant (in many senses) colleague who, after dealing with a 'client' over the phone, yelled out, "People! I can't stand them!" Needless to say he preferred working on his own.

A hissy fit case-study

We'll encounter what some say are people being 'difficult'. I've done it myself and it was worthwhile for me to later reflect on my state of mind whilst I was being 'difficult.' This was at the extreme end of the scale and I can't say that I'm proud of it, but it was a valuable learning experience.

I was summoned to a 'compulsory' training workshop (I use this term very loosely) for a training organisation that I (still occasionally!) work for. At the time I was really under the pump, heaps of projects, workshops, deadlines etc. The workshop started at 4.00pm and I had started working a 6.00am (poor me!).

In my humble view, the facilitator was long-winded in his introduction, mumbled and was difficult to understand. The tasks required seemed to me to lack purpose and were based on outdated and detailed information (we were meant to be having input on a coaching manual). I just wanted him to get to the point and get our feedback. He kept talking. I withdrew. He kept talking. When I re-entered the conversation a point I made appeared (to me) to be ignored and/or dismissed. This seemed to happen a few times. I snapped and really told him what I thought of him & his workshop. It was not pretty - at all. Everyone felt embarrassed, especially me.

There were a number of issues here that led to me being 'difficult' and if handled differently may have yielded a different outcome:

- Clear information provided before the workshop
- Personal introduction (if possible) before the workshop started (this may have alerted the facilitator of my fragile state of mind or helped me relax)
- Clarity of purpose re the workshop & its limitations
- Focused approach of the facilitator
- Timing of the workshop

When the hissy-fit occurred perhaps a better approach from the facilitator may have been to:

- Say, "clearly I've missed something here, please tell me exactly...(what needs to change/what you're concerned about/why you're frustrated)"

Maybe it's you?

- Follow up with “what should we do with/about this?”
- Take a break & let Mr Difficult cool down. Maybe speak to him 1:1 to clear the air

Much of the literature regarding ‘Dealing with difficult people’ directs the reader to focus on themselves and why they feel that the participant is actually being difficult. This suggests that we may need to consider our own attitudes towards people. Other resources provide some practical tips for managing different behaviours of people (when these behaviours start to impact upon the workshop process). We’ll look at this from both angles

Your own attitudes & feelings

They're not 'being difficult'

The first step is to reframe the situation. If you think you are dealing with a difficult person, it will be difficult. Ask yourself why you think this person is a challenge. If you think you are dealing with a challenge, it can be invigorating.

Use the Stephen Covey rule “seek first to understand”

Often the simple act of understanding the person will be enough to have the person deal with you civilly. People have a need to be understood and if they feel understood, they tend to be easier to work with. If you truly understand the other person, often you will see a solution to the challenge or will have empathy for them and not feel as threatened.

Leave stubbornness (and ego) at the door.

In some cases where someone is very challenging, it is because both of the parties are set on their point of view.

Chill

If you cannot change the situation, live with it. Not only tolerate it but do not stress about what cannot be changed.

Now here's some simple tips to help you in preventing and dealing with hissy fits like mine

Tip 1 - Position

This is going to sound very basic-but teachers do it all the time – if you have a circle you put the dominating person beside you where they have difficulty making eye contact with you as facilitator.

Tip 2 - Ground rules

Setting ground-rules at the beginning. Include rules such as the ROPES

Respect - everyone's opinion

Openness- be honest in what you're thinking

Participate - be part of the process

Experience - help people from your own learning

Share the air - give others a go too

Discuss what these will actually mean within the session prior to commencing. Help the group to adopt these and to take responsibility for applying them.

You can also include a subtle hint at this stage. "Some people find it easy to talk in sessions, and some don't - so I will be asking those who find it easy to hold back a little to allow others to speak, and those who find it more difficult to make an effort to have their say". This is a general and non-threatening opening for hearing the more quiet people and giving yourself permission to remind people of this later.

Tip 3 - Clarify expectations

FIRST say what the meeting or workshop is aiming to achieve THEN ask people what their expectations are. Have a brief discussion in twos or threes about what people expect from the meeting followed by general feedback from that discussion.

This allows people to get things off their chest, and chat to someone else, hear their own voice, clarify their thoughts, recognise that everyone is there with a reason or an agenda or a set of expectations. It also helps to focus the meeting in the direction that it needs to head. Giving people this chance allows some who would be disruptive later to have their say early on.

Tip 4 - Spread the load

Use pairs or small group discussion. Give tasks/discussion topics to pairs ("turn to the person next to you and discuss XXX for a few minutes") and then ask for feedback from each or some pairs. Do the same with groups of 3-4.

Tip 5 - Validation

A useful approach to validation is to say "you clearly have some experience in this area, can you give us a specific example of where this has worked for you?" Then validate the response. "Thank you, now I'd like to bring others into this discussion" by asking the group "Now that we've heard from "Peter" what do others think of what "Peter" has said or "what other experience have you had that may add to our discussion?" Then spread the discussion using a variety of facilitation techniques.

Tip 6 - Make a friend

During the breaks talk with “Peter”, lean more about him, validate his experience then, hear what his feelings are about how the session is progressing and what he thinks of what others are saying. Be a coach and help him to listen and learn.

Tip 7 - Be upfront

Deal with the actual issue when it happens. You can make a general statement like “there might be some people who have not yet had a chance to speak”. Then if that doesn’t help the very vocal people or person to be quiet, you could direct a request at that person or people: “please could you hold that comment and see if someone who hasn’t yet commented has something to say”. If the discussion persists and it’s not related to the meeting or workshop outcome, I’ve often used this comment - “That sounds like a great lunchtime conversation - can we continue it then?”

So next time you think things are getting tricky, think back to these tips!

Need more information?

Go to **www.andrewhuffer.com.au**

Want some assistance with facilitation?

Contact Andrew Huffer on (0429) 470 285



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Acknowledgements

The information used in this article was gained from a range of sources including:

- Practical experience
- The Human Leadership and Development Division of the American Society for Quality
- The Association for Quality and Participation
- The International Association of Facilitators