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## DEALING WITH DIFFICULT DYNAMICS

SUPPORTIVE INTERVENTIONS  
THAT DON'T MAKE ANYONE WRONG

- ◆ Understanding the Phenomenon of "The Difficult Person"
- ◆ Inventory of Typical Mistakes and Effective Interventions
- ◆ Overcoming the Tendency to Defer to Authority
- ◆ Handling Out-of-Context Distractions
- ◆ Stepping Back from the Discussion to Talk about the Process
- ◆ Discussing Difficult Dynamics

## DIFFICULT DYNAMICS PRODUCE DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Periods of misunderstanding and confusion are normal when a group has to wrestle with a difficult problem. These periods are characterized by feelings of tedium, tension and a general sense of impatience and frustration. Even though these are normal experiences, they are nonetheless unpleasant.

Staying focused at such times is an enormous challenge. Clear-headed thinking deteriorates as emotional urgency intensifies. Some people get so exasperated and overwhelmed they can barely pay attention. Others feel compelled to take over the leadership of the discussion, whether or not they know how to do it effectively. Some people just want to withdraw and get away. And others, feeling their anger rise, struggle privately to stay cool – when what they *really* want to do is pick a fight.

Despite the rise in tension, many people continue making efforts to stay present and committed to the task. They keep trying – but they're trying under pressure. This can't help but affect their moods, their presentation styles, and their thinking abilities. Their behavior toward others may be less than sensitive. They might blurt out their ideas with less tact than usual. They might go on and on – oblivious to the effect they're having on their audience – because they feel they're on the verge of an important line of thought. These are a few of the countless examples of the symptoms people exhibit when trying to contribute their best thinking under stress.

The expression of these symptoms makes many people uncomfortable. If there is a facilitator, people usually look to the facilitator to "save them" from their anguish. Indeed, many popular books\* claim that the facilitator's proper response to difficult dynamics is to "control those difficult people." For example, it's conventional wisdom to talk to such a person during the break and ask him or her to tone it down. Similarly, most people expect a facilitator to interrupt people who deviate from a topic and exhort them to "get back on track." We believe, however, that so-called solutions like these are based on a faulty line of analysis – namely, that eliminating a symptom will somehow remove the cause of the distress.

This chapter offers the reader a different perspective. Difficult dynamics are treated as group situations that can be handled supportively rather than as individual personalities which need to be fixed. On the first four pages, advice is given for handling twelve common "difficult" situations. The remaining pages provide tools that help group members work together to tackle *any* pattern they may wish to change.

\* For example, see *Dinosaur Brains*, A. Bernstein, New York: Balantine, 1990.

## DEALING WITH DIFFICULT DYNAMICS

### PROBLEM

### TYPICAL MISTAKE

### EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

DOMINATION  
BY A HIGHLY  
VERBAL MEMBER

Inexperienced facilitators often try to control this person. "Excuse me, Mr. Q, do you mind if I let someone else take a turn?"

Or, even worse, "Excuse me, Ms. Q, you're taking up a lot of the group's time . . ."

When one person is over-participating, everyone else is under-participating. So, focus your efforts on the passive majority. Encourage *them* to participate more. Trying to change the dominant person merely gives that person all the more attention.

GOOFING AROUND  
IN THE MIDST OF A  
DISCUSSION

It's tempting to try to "organize" people by getting into a power struggle with them. "Okay, everybody, let's get refocused." This only works when the problem isn't very serious.

*Aim for a break as soon as possible.* People have become undisciplined because they are overloaded or worn out. After a breather, they will be much better able to focus.

LOW  
PARTICIPATION  
BY THE ENTIRE  
GROUP

Low participation can create the impression that a lot of work is getting done in a hurry. This leads to one of the worst errors a facilitator can make: assume that silence means consent, and *do nothing* to encourage more participation.

Switch from large-group open discussion to a different format that lowers the anxiety level. Often, idea-listing is the perfect remedy. If safety is a major concern, small group activities are very important.

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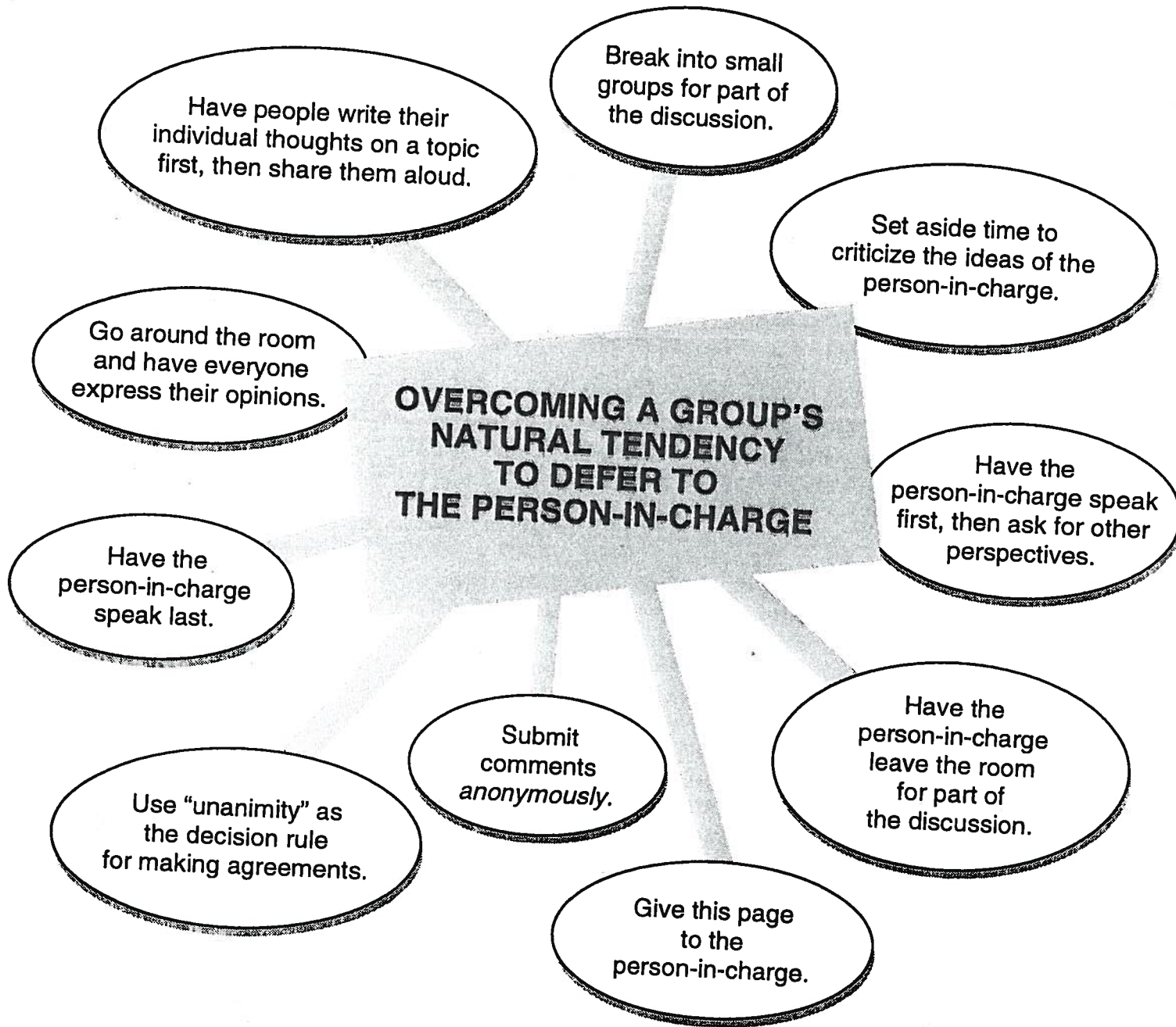
PROBLEM	TYPICAL MISTAKE	EFFECTIVE RESPONSE
<p>TWO PEOPLE LOCKING HORNS</p>	<p>A lot of time can get wasted trying to "resolve a conflict" between two people who have no intention of reaching agreement. People often use one another as sparring partners, in order to clarify their own ideas.</p>	<p>Reach out to other members and say, "Who else has an opinion on this issue?" or, "Let's step back for a minute – are there any other issues that need to be discussed?" Remember: don't focus your attention on the dominant minority, focus on the passive majority.</p>
<p>ONE OR TWO SILENT MEMBERS IN A GROUP WHOSE OTHER MEMBERS PARTICIPATE ACTIVELY</p>	<p>"Mr. Z, you haven't talked much today. Is there anything you'd like to add?" This may work when a shy member has non-verbally indicated a wish to speak. But all too often, the quiet person feels put on the spot and withdraws further.</p>	<p>"I'd like to get opinions from those who haven't talked for a while."</p> <p>Breaking into small groups works even better. Small groups allow shy members to speak up without having to compete for "air time."</p>
<p>WHISPERING AND SIDE JOKES</p>	<p>Facilitators commonly ignore this behavior in the hope that it will go away. Sometimes it does, but it frequently gets worse.</p>	<p>With warmth and humor, make an appeal for decorum. "As you know, those who don't hear the joke often wonder if someone is laughing at <i>them</i>."</p> <p>If the problem persists, assume there's a reason. Has the topic become boring and stale? Do people need a break? Or the reverse – maybe <i>everyone</i> needs time for small group discussion.</p>

## DEALING WITH DIFFICULT DYNAMICS

PROBLEM	TYPICAL MISTAKE	EFFECTIVE RESPONSE
MINIMAL PARTICIPATION BY MEMBERS WHO DON'T FEEL INVESTED IN THE TOPIC	<p>Act as though silence signifies agreement with what's been said.</p> <p>Ignore them and be thankful they're not making trouble.</p>	<p>Look for an opportunity to have a discussion on "What's important to me about this topic?" Have people break into small groups to begin the discussion. This gives everyone time to explore their own stake in the outcome.</p>
POOR FOLLOW-THROUGH ON ASSIGNMENTS	<p>Give an ineffective pep-talk.</p> <p>Ignore it. "We didn't really need that information anyway."</p> <p>Put most of the responsibility on one or two people.</p>	<p>Have people do assignments in teams.</p> <p>Build in a report-back process at a midpoint before the assignment is due. This gives anyone having trouble a chance to get help.</p>
FAILURE TO START ON TIME AND END ON TIME	<p>Wait for the arrival of all the "people who count." This obviously means starting late – but hey, what else can you do?</p> <p>When it's time to end, go overtime without asking. If anyone has to leave, they should tiptoe out.</p>	<p>Start when you say you're going to start. (Waiting encourages lateness.)</p> <p>If you must go overtime, call a break so people can "phone home."</p> <p>If going overtime is recurrent, improve your agenda planning.</p>

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PROBLEM	TYPICAL MISTAKE	EFFECTIVE RESPONSE
<p>QUIBBLING ABOUT TRIVIAL PROCEDURES</p>	<p>Lecture the group about wasting time and "spinning our wheels."</p> <p>Space out, doodle and think to yourself, "It's their fault we're not getting anything done."</p>	<p>Have the group step back from the content of the issue and talk about the process. Ask the group, "What is really going on here?"</p>
<p>SOMEONE BECOMES STRIDENT AND REPETITIVE</p>	<p>At lunch, talk behind the person's back. Tell the person-in-charge that s/he must take more control.</p> <p>Confront the person during a break. Then, when the meeting resumes, act surprised when his/her anxiety goes through the roof!</p>	<p>People repeat themselves because they don't feel heard. Summarize the person's point of view until s/he feels understood.</p> <p>Encourage participants to state the views of group members whose views are different from their own.</p>
<p>SOMEONE DISCOVERS A COMPLETELY NEW PROBLEM THAT NO ONE HAD PREVIOUSLY NOTED</p>	<p>Try to come up with reasons why the group would not need to focus on that issue.</p> <p>Pretend not to hear the person's comments.</p>	<p>Wake up! This may be what you've been waiting for – the doorway into a new way of thinking about the whole situation.</p>



The most straightforward way to overcome a group's tendency to defer to the person-in-charge is to *identify the tendency and educate the group*. Acknowledge that it takes courage to speak truthfully in a hierarchy. Ask people to discuss what they might say differently if the person-in-charge were not in the room. Some people will respond defensively; others will be surprisingly honest. Remember that everyone – from the boldest risk-taker to the most cautious diplomat – will need the facilitator's respect and support.

## ACKNOWLEDGING DISTRACTIONS

### THE SITUATION

Current events sometimes interfere with a group's ability to concentrate. After a terrible storm, for example, people need to talk about their flooded basements and leaking roofs. After an election, people need to discover how they feel about the potential impacts. During an organizational transition – a massive layoff, say – people need to let off steam and express their anxieties.

What should a group do when faced with distractions like these? Many people believe that the best response is to ignore their existence. This belief is grounded in value judgments however, not in empirical fact. Realistically, the presence of a serious distraction will lower a group's efficiency *regardless of what group members are officially allowed to talk about.*

This activity gives people the chance to spend a well-structured period of time talking about what's really on their minds. After expressing themselves, people are often better able to concentrate on the work at hand.

### THE TECHNIQUE

1. If it's obvious that the group is having trouble focusing on the topic at hand, suggest that people talk about whatever might be the source of distraction. For example, "I notice we're having a hard time concentrating on this subject, and I'm aware that [the recent event] is on a lot of people's minds. Could we step back and spend a few minutes talking about [the event]?"
2. After securing agreement from the group to proceed, pose an open-ended question, such as "What *are* people feeling about [the event]?" Ask everyone to respond.
3. When everyone has spoken, suggest a sequence for making the transition back to the main topic. For example, "What if we spend a few more minutes in this conversation, then take a short break and return to the main topic after the break?"



## STEP BACK FROM THE DISCUSSION AND TALK ABOUT THE PROCESS

### THE SITUATION

Meetings sometimes get bogged down for unknown reasons. For example, during a discussion some people keep bringing up a topic about which the group had already made a decision. At such times a facilitator may be tempted to ask the group, "What's going on here? We appear to be stuck; does anyone have any ideas why?"

One might expect such a comment to help a group reflect on their process. But it seldom works. The sudden "level shift" is too confusing. A few people will respond to the facilitator, but most will keep discussing the original topic. The problem is that some people don't realize they are being asked to step back from the discussion and talk about their process.

Here's a better strategy. First, point out that something isn't working. Next, obtain the group's agreement to step back from the discussion and talk about their process. *This is the crucial step.* Once members signal their readiness to proceed, everyone together can explore what's blocking them.

### THE TECHNIQUE

1. Describe the predicament. Use facts to support your observations. "The group is having trouble staying on topic. Three people have asked us to stay focused on the budget, but someone keeps changing the subject."
2. Obtain agreement to proceed. "It might be useful to step back from the discussion for a moment and explore what's getting in the way. I have a simple way to do this and would like your agreement to proceed."
3. When agreement is obtained, ask a question that focuses on the process, not the content, of the preceding discussion. For example, "Does anyone have any thoughts about the way we are working together?"
4. After three or four responses ask a more pointed question. For example, "What might be blocking us from working more effectively?"
5. When participants seem ready to return to the original task, prepare the group to make the shift. Ask, "Before you return to [the topic], are there any further reactions to what has just been said?"
6. Option: Call a short break at this point. The group's leadership will probably use the time to rethink the agenda.

## DISCUSSING DIFFICULT DYNAMICS

### STRENGTHS & IMPROVABLES

1. Hang two sheets of paper. Title one page, "Strengths." Title the other page, "Improvables." \*
2. Ask someone to call out a strength. Then ask someone else to call out an improvable. Build the two lists simultaneously.
3. Encourage participants to speak frankly in the spirit of constructive learning.
4. While the lists are being made, the ground rule of suspended judgment is in effect – no defending, explaining or apologizing.

### LEARNING FROM LAST WEEK'S EXPERIENCE

1. Ask participants to look back on their last meeting and recall anything that made them feel uncomfortable.
2. Brainstorm a list: What can we do to handle this better in the future?
3. If everyone agrees to abide by one or more items on the list, fine. Often, however, agreement does not come easily because unresolved feelings may still be present. Rather than attempt to force an agreement prematurely, treat steps 1 and 2 as a consciousness-raising activity. Often, simply naming a problem goes a long way toward changing it.

\* Many facilitators substitute "+" for "Strengths," and "Δ" (the Greek symbol for change) for "Improvables."