

Training of Trainers

Managing Conflict in a Group Session

A difficult issue to handle has to do with the occasional tendency of discussions to move into controversial areas, to degenerate into argument, and, one way or another, to become less constructive.

Handling these gracefully is a matter of experience, but we can suggest some general strategies and describe some of the type of issues that do arise.

☐ ***Keep the focus on learning.***

If conflicts arise, focus on the difference, point out the conflicts, ask diagnostic questions, and check assumptions. Show that in conflicts, assumptions are almost always involved, that more data are needed, and that this is another instance of a potential conflict based on a difference of perspective. Concentrate on the fact that there are differences and different assumptions, rather than on the conflict itself (which may not even exist).

☐ ***Deal with it privately, if possible.***

It is often useful to say, "Why don't we talk about that privately?" People will often be satisfied if they know that they have been heard, and even more if they will have a chance to discuss it further. Alternatively, if more than one person is involved in a conflict, you can suggest, "Why don't you (or we) get together later and talk about it?"

☐ ***Stay on the track.***

Another possible issue arises because of comments that are interesting but not relevant. If the purpose of the discussion is clear (and it should be), then it's often possible to cut off a potentially digressive comment or 'conflicting' remark by pointing out that it is interesting, but not consistent with the rest of the discussion.

Here is a list of some comments that can be troublesome, and some ways of handling them:

☐ ***"I don't understand why we're doing this."***

This can always be a legitimate question and it should be treated that way as a start. That means saying a bit more to explain (even if you've already explained several times). However, it may be a mask for hostility. In explaining it because of the hostility, firmly moving onto something else, is probably the best response. If people continue to repeat the statement and say they still don't understand, then say, "Why don't we talk about it later? Maybe as we go along, it will be clearer; if not, raise your question again later," or "Perhaps one of your colleagues can help."

🔍 **This is a waste of time. “I don’t want to be here anyway,” “I was forced to come”**

All of these comments should be treated sympathetically. First of all, it may well be true from some people’s point of view. They may have been sent, they may have other things they’d rather be doing, and it may appear to be a waste of time. There are several possible responses.

First and foremost, it is to be regretted if people feel ‘sent.’ One can sympathize directly with that; often those feelings can be used to illustrate feelings of other subordinates who are controlled, not listened to or directed without their consent, and these feelings can be connected to the workshop’s content. In addition, you can point out that since people are spending the time anyway, it’s worth trying to get something out of it. It’s often possible that having made their point, people are willing to move on and do eventually find themselves able to learn. Sympathy is more useful than challenge in any case. Ultimately, of course, people presumably have the option to leave, though if they feel isolated in their view, social pressure will usually restrain them. Remember also that other participants can also respond, and often will, through such responses may be made where you can’t hear them. Much important discussion goes on outside the formal meeting time.

🔍 **People making fun of someone**

Here, the instructor has an important role in making sure that his sort of thing is not endorsed by the group. This is particularly critical in EEO sessions, where men make jokes about women that exemplify the problems being addressed. Such things should be dealt with firmly but calmly, by pointing out the problems caused by doing that, and by clearly standing apart from the implied view. The instructors must not laugh at those jokes or be caught up in put-downs or denigration’s of other people. On the contrary, they really need to set an important stance of non-participation in such ‘jokes’ and even disapproval.

🔍 **Some offers a preposterous suggestion as a joke**

This often happens when people are suggesting options, or in the reporting out of small groups when some people are feeling angry or hostile. The best response is simply to accept the suggestion as legitimate, restate it, and write it down along with other things. People will be more embarrassed by that than anything else, and will be very likely to stop making such “jokes.”