

Dealing With Difficult Class Participants

Some people are perceived as being difficult by everyone who encounters them.

We have all had the experience of encountering difficult people in our lives. Invariably, one of these “difficult people” will show up in a class you are facilitating. It is important to recognize who these people are and understand them so that you can manage them. Of equal importance is controlling your reaction to their behaviors.

Instead of dealing with their own issues and improving their behavior, difficult people like to intimidate others and feel in control.

The Difficult Person Profile

Some people are perceived as being difficult by everyone who encounters them. They are often selfish, self-centered, unhappy people. Instead of dealing with their own issues and improving their behavior, difficult people like to intimidate others and feel in control. They are often challenging and disruptive. They can sabotage the facilitator and intimidate other participants in a marriage education workshop. There are common styles of difficult people:

The know-it-alls know everything and often challenge the group facilitator. They question the facilitator continuously and can be argumentative. They are competitive and opinionated.

The busybodies like to talk about everyone and express their unsolicited opinions all the time. They try to tell others how to live their lives. They often meddle in other people’s affairs and are gossipers.

The bullies are angry and domineering. They are hostile and intimidating.

The do-nothings will not engage in any group activities and discussions, they will not take risks and they come across as apathetic and bored.

The volcanoes usually create a lot of tension in a group; they are often loud, argumentative and explosive. They intimidate others with their unpredictable reactions.

The complainers are always negative and see the glass perpetually as “half-empty.” They complain and always have reasons why the ideas you have won’t work.

How to Respond

One of the keys to dealing with difficult people is to not personalize their behavior. It is easy to feel hurt when encountering a difficult person, or to end up feeling angry and helpless. If you personalize the individual’s behavior, it can often cause you to have feelings of inadequacy and to question your skills as a facilitator. By changing your attitude, you can move from conflict into a common ground.



- ✓ Accept that conflicts are a natural part of life. It is the natural result of differences in people. We all have different needs and beliefs and therefore will always have conflicts.
- ✓ Treat conflicts as opportunities. Conflict is neither positive nor negative. We can view it as an opportunity to grow, learn and improve relationships.
- ✓ Be aware of your initial reaction and take a deep breath: everyone has automatic reactions to conflict. You may want to avoid it completely, put up your defenses or dig in and fight. Our immediate response depends on who is involved and what the conflict is about. Instead of giving in to our initial impulses, it is important to pause and carefully choose your approach.

Remember, you cannot change another person's behavior; you can only change your response to that person. Do not let them get the best of you. By reacting mindfully you can decrease the conflict that may arise.

Remember, you cannot change another person's behavior; you can only change your response to that person.

Your Approach

Don't engage in conflict with this individual; it will be a no-win situation. Count to ten and breathe deeply before you react to their behavior. Always think before you say something to him or her.

Do call a short break during class after encountering that difficult someone so that you can regroup. Use that time to relax and gather your thoughts.

Don't try to manage the difficult person by avoiding him or her. Take a direct and assertive approach. Have a private discussion with him or her about the behaviors you have seen. Be specific. Clearly communicate your expectations for their behavior

within the group by using "I messages."

Don't discuss the difficult person with group participants either individually or as a group. Everyone recognizes this person. Conferring with the group to validate your feelings and perceptions will cause you to be seen as a gossip and you will lose credibility.

Do take a "soft" approach to disarm the abrasive person. Surprise the person by seeking out and focusing on their positive traits. Find one thing that

Don't try to manage the difficult person by avoiding him or her. Take a direct and assertive approach.

may be likeable about that person and try to engage them on that topic. Difficult people are used to alienating others and can sometimes be diffused by a positive response and approach from another person.

Ultimately, you do not have to put up with the difficult person's behavior in your workshop. If they become too disruptive and draining to the class, despite your attempts to talk about behavior expectations, then you should privately tell them that they are no longer welcome

in the classroom. This may be very hard to do, but there is no reason you should put up with this behavior if you have addressed your concerns with this person before.

It is easy to get along with people we like and enjoy. A difficult person can create havoc and tension in the life of a facilitator. By learning how to deal effectively with a negative person, a facilitator can preserve the integrity of the group and allow the group to function in the manner that it should. Learning the skills to manage difficult people will be a challenge but it will help you become a better facilitator. Remember, if facilitation were easy, everyone would be doing it!