

# CLASSIC FACILITATOR CHALLENGES

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– *excerpted from* –

*Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making, 2nd edition*

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*Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making, 2nd Edition*  
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## CLASSIC FACILITATOR CHALLENGES

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### 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, but you're taking up a lot of the group's time . . ."

When one or two people are 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 participants just sends even more attention their way.

GOOFING AROUND  
IN THE MIDST OF A  
DISCUSSION

Try to "organize" people by getting into a power struggle with them. Raise your voice if necessary. Single out the individuals who seem to be the ringleaders.

"All right everyone, let's get back to work." (Or better yet, "Focus, people, focus!")

Often a break is the best response. People become undisciplined when they are overloaded or worn out. After a breather, they will be much better able to focus.

Alternatively, ask for advice: "Is there something we ought to be doing differently?"

LOW  
PARTICIPATION  
BY THE ENTIRE  
GROUP

Assume that silence means consent. Don't ask whether everyone understands the key issues and agrees with what's being said. (That just wastes time unnecessarily.)

Praise the group for all the work that's getting done, in the hope that flattery will motivate more people to participate.

Always be suspicious of low participation. Dependency, anger, or fear are often factors in play. The group, however, may not want to surface those feelings. If not, shift from *open discussion* to a format that lowers the anxiety level. Work in small groups, or build a list, or try a highly structured activity like a *fishbowl* or a *jigsaw*.

## CLASSIC FACILITATOR CHALLENGES

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### PROBLEM

### TYPICAL MISTAKE

### EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

SEVERAL  
DIFFERENT TOPICS  
BEING DISCUSSED  
AT THE SAME TIME

“Come on, everyone, let’s  
get back on track.”

“Focus, people, focus!!”

Select the topic you think  
the group would most  
benefit from discussing, and  
do your best to sell your  
point of view: “I’m not at  
all attached to this, but . . .”

Use *tracking*: Name the  
various topics in play. “Let  
me see if I can summarize the  
key themes being discussed.”

Use *linking*: “Can you help us  
link your idea to the central  
issues before us?”

Create a *parking lot* for ideas  
and issues to return to later.

MANY PEOPLE  
INTERRUPTING  
ONE ANOTHER,  
IN COMPETITION  
FOR AIRTIME

Take control. Don’t be shy  
about interrupting the  
conversation yourself, in  
order to exhort people to be  
more respectful.

Select one person to speak,  
but give no indication of  
whose turn will come next.  
That would undercut  
spontaneity.

If you must interrupt in  
order to restore decorum,  
say, “Pat, I’m going to cut in  
here. First, let’s make sure  
your point is being heard.  
Then, I want to suggest a  
process that will cut down  
on further interruptions.”

After you complete your  
paraphrase, use *stacking*,  
*tracking*, and *sequencing* to  
organize the group.

PEOPLE TREAT  
ONE ANOTHER  
DISRESPECTFULLY

Ignore it altogether.  
No sense throwing fuel on  
the fire.

Pretend that posting a  
ground rule imploring  
people to “be respectful”  
will somehow create  
respectful behavior.

Increase the frequency of  
your paraphrasing. People  
under pressure need support.

If proposing a ground rule,  
be sure to create time for the  
group to reflect on what’s  
happening and what they  
want to do differently.

## CLASSIC FACILITATOR CHALLENGES

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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>Encourage a discussion: "What's important to me about this topic?" Warm up in pairs, so everyone has time to explore his or her stake in the outcome.</p> <p>Before next meeting, ask the planners to assess why people don't seem more invested.</p>
POOR FOLLOW-THROUGH ON ASSIGNMENTS	<p>Give an ineffective pep talk.</p> <p>Ignore it.</p> <p>Excuse it: "Oh well, we didn't really need that information anyway."</p>	<p>Assign the work to 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>Announce, "We're going to start in five minutes." Then, five minutes later, repeat the same announcement, but this time say, "Just a few more minutes."</p> <p>Wait for the arrival of the "people who count," but don't bother waiting for anyone with lower ranking.</p> <p>When it's time to end, go overtime without asking. If anyone has to leave, they should know how to tiptoe out without disturbing anyone.</p>	<p>Option 1: Start the meeting when it is scheduled to begin. (Principle: Keep your word.)</p> <p>Option 2: Wait for everyone to arrive. (Principle: If someone's attendance isn't valuable, why is s/he coming in the first place?) Waiting for all will demonstrate that one person's tardiness can waste a lot of salaried staff time.</p> <p>Note: Make sure it is the person-in-charge, not you, who sets the policy and enforces it.</p> <p>If meetings chronically run late, improve your agenda planning.</p>

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### PROBLEM

### TYPICAL MISTAKE

### EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

TWO PEOPLE  
LOCKING HORNS

Put the focus exclusively on the interaction between the two disputing parties, as though no one else in the room has an opinion on the issue at hand.

Reach out to others: "Who else has an opinion on this issue?" or "Are there any other issues that need to be discussed before we go too much further with this one?"

Or, treat the two like children. "Come on, you two, can't you get along?"

Remember: When the majority is passive, focus your attention on *them*, not on the over-active few.

ONE OR TWO  
SILENT MEMBERS  
IN A GROUP  
WHOSE OTHER  
MEMBERS  
PARTICIPATE  
ACTIVELY

"Mr. Z, you haven't talked much today. Is there anything you'd like to add?"  
This may work when a shy member has nonverbally indicated a wish to speak. But all too often, the quiet person feels put on the spot and withdraws further.

"I'd like to get opinions from those who haven't talked for a while."

Breaking into small groups works even better, allowing shy members to speak up without being pressed to compete for airtime.

SIDE CONVERSATIONS  
AND WHISPERED  
CHUCKLES

Ignore the behavior and hope it will go away.

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 *them*."

Chastise the whisperers, in the belief that humiliation is an excellent corrective.

If the problem persists, assume there's a reason. Has the topic become boring and stale? Do people need a break?

## CLASSIC FACILITATOR CHALLENGES

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### PROBLEM

### TYPICAL MISTAKE

### EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

QUIBBLING  
ABOUT TRIVIAL  
PROCEDURES

Lecture the group about  
wasting time and “spinning  
our wheels.”

Space out, doodle, and think  
to yourself, “It’s their fault  
we’re not getting anything  
done.”

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?”

SOMEONE  
BECOMES  
STRIDENT AND  
REPETITIVE

At lunch, talk behind the  
person’s back. Tell the  
person-in-charge that s/he  
must take more control.

Confront the person during  
a break. When the meeting  
resumes, raise your eyebrows  
or shake your head  
whenever s/he misbehaves.

People repeat themselves  
because they don’t feel  
heard. Summarize the  
person’s point of view until  
s/he feels understood.

Encourage participants to  
state the views of group  
members whose views are  
different from their own.

SOMEONE  
DISCOVERS A  
COMPLETELY  
NEW PROBLEM  
THAT NO ONE  
HAD PREVIOUSLY  
NOTED

Try to come up with reasons  
to discourage people from  
opening up this new can of  
worms.

Pretend not to hear the  
person’s comments.

Wake up! This may be what  
you’ve been waiting for: the  
doorway into a new way of  
thinking about the whole  
situation.