

HOW TO RUN A NON-CONFRONTATIONAL MEETING

How to Manage Controversy and Conflict?

Let's say your meeting is deteriorating into little squabbles, people are locking horns and the discussion is going in circles. You need to alter the climate of the meeting... and fast! In a situation like this, try using the ideas outlined below:



1. Tell participants that you have watched the meeting deteriorate in the last several minutes and you want to try something to see whether it will help them.
2. Explain that you would like to have everyone abide by a stringent ground rule for the next ten minutes. Let them know it's designed to change the way meeting participants are interacting with one another, then ask participants if they will agree to do it.

Select one or more of the following rule changes:

- As each person speaks, he must first paraphrase what the previous speaker said. This ground rule will force participants to focus on views other than their own.
- Each speaker must take personal responsibility for what they say. This means the speaker can only voice opinions for them self and must insert "in my opinion" or "here's what I think" before speaking.
- Each participant will be given a quota of turns to speak. Give out a small quantity of objects (tickets, paper clips, coins) to each participant. One item must be relinquished every time a turn is taken. When their supply is exhausted, the person can only listen. This will stop certain participants from dominating the meeting discussion.
- Only questions are allowed. All participants listen to the questions on each others' minds. No responses can be given until every participant has had a chance to express one question.



- Participants must say what they like about another's idea before giving any criticism. Or they must use the phrase "This could work if..." This keeps everyone in the positive and helps avoid unhealthy criticism.

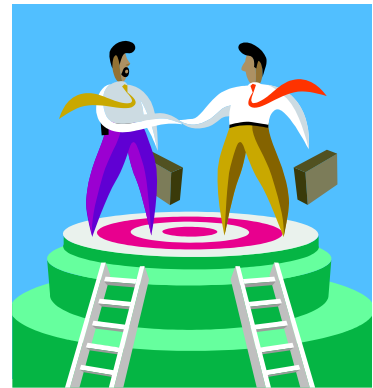
How to Deal with Opposing Views?

Dealing with opposing views is never easy. If you're leading a meeting that is likely to be confrontational, you'll have to take this into account during the initial planning stage.

First, be very clear as to the purpose of the meeting. Before your meeting, set goals and decide upon the specific objective. Have a list of agenda items that need to be discussed, and identify the desired outcome for each. For example, a section of your meeting agenda might look something like this:

1. *Agenda Item:* Discuss the sales budget for the upcoming quarter.
Objective: Define a definite budget and allocate it across sales activities.
2. *Agenda Item:* Discuss company goals and objectives for the upcoming year.
Objective: Define a set of measurable goals for the sales department to have achieved in the next year. Have accounting allocate a budget to achieve each one of those goals.

- If your discussion isn't structured, it's more likely to disintegrate into petty bickering. Attempting to reach a clearly defined objective will create a sense of unity between opposing groups, which is really the underlying purpose of your meeting.
- When you send the invitations to the meeting, ask attendees if they have any agenda item requests. If participants are able to contribute to the meeting agenda, they're less likely to feel resentful coming into the meeting. Once you've compiled the agenda, make sure everyone has access to it before the meeting. If participants come into the meeting with a better understanding of the objectives, it will help everyone understand their colleagues' motivations, before things become confrontational.
- Carefully consider who should be attending the meeting. Only invite those whose attendance is absolutely necessary. The fewer people involved, the easier it is for everyone to have their say, and the easier it is for the facilitator to keep things on track.



- During the meeting, make sure you involve as many people as possible. Ask quiet attendees for their opinions, call on a variety of people, and don't allow nonstop talkers to monopolize the discussion. You might find that it's only a few vocal individuals who are argumentative. If their involvement is limited, things may run a lot smoother.

- As the meeting leader, it's also your responsibility to keep things on track. This means steering the meeting discussion in a way that fulfills the meeting objectives. If you have difficult personalities in the room or opposing views, this can be challenging! Try using sentences such as, "That's a valid point, but doesn't directly apply to this discussion. Perhaps we should schedule a separate meeting to address it fully." Or, "It's obvious there are some opposing views surrounding this issue. Perhaps our time would be best spent working towards a compromise. Any suggestions?" If a meeting becomes particularly heated, it's best to address what's possible in the meeting but consider hiring a professional facilitator for the next meeting – a neutral leader who's trained to deal with high-pressure, high-conflict meetings.



- Make sure you develop action items for issues that need follow-up. Assign a particular individual or group to complete each action item. A deadline and priority level should also be assigned for the action items. If attendees see that there is a concrete result to their meeting, they will be more open to further discussion.
- And finally, at the end of the meeting, make sure you review the meeting process. Take a few moments to discuss what the group did well during the meeting and which areas need improving. Letting everyone have their say will go a long way in reducing some of the disharmony between your groups.



How to Deal with Chatty Meeting Participants?



A participant who is continuously chatting with their neighbor can be extremely disruptive to the entire group. You need to step in and deal with this as soon as possible, otherwise your entire meeting can disintegrate. The quickest and most effective way to deal with someone who is involved in a side conversation is to openly acknowledge their behavior. Ask if they have anything to share with the group. If they don't, ask them to save their discussion to

the end of the meeting. If they do, tell them that you appreciate their comments, but next time, could they wait until the previous person has finished speaking before interjecting. Most people only need to be challenged once, and will be sufficiently embarrassed to change their behavior.



If you would prefer to avoid any sort of conflict, you can drop a subtle hint. If someone is being particularly disruptive, ask them a direct question. This should pull their focus back to the matter at hand. Try something like, "John, what's your opinion of Betty's last point?" People hate being caught without an appropriate comment so this may scare them into listening next time!

If neither of these tips work you may have to speak with the offender outside the meeting. Pull them aside and explain that you're finding their whispering distracting. Ask if there's any way they could keep their conversations for outside of the meeting room.