



Working With Difficult People In Focus Groups

Most people who come to groups are constructive. Most groups are sensitive to the need for all people to participate and exercise a kind of restraint over wayward members. However, difficult people can make the group far less satisfying for others and less productive and therefore facilitators sometimes need to intervene.

The basic management comes from establishing rapport with people through making them feel welcomed and valued as soon as they arrive in the building. Continue to make people feel appreciated throughout the group. If these steps are not enough to settle people in then you may need to take actions like the ones below.

Character / Symptoms	Responses
<p>The Wallflower</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Will only speak when asked directly <input type="checkbox"/> Limited responses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ask often and probe initial response. Perhaps give them time to think and come back to them. <input type="checkbox"/> Reward every contribution with smiles, nods and thank-yous <input type="checkbox"/> Start with very simple or factual questions they must know the answer to. <input type="checkbox"/> Use go-rounds <input type="checkbox"/> Ask them to comment on what other people have said and why they agree or disagree.
<p>The Volcano</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Angry with the organisation , local management or for reasons not given. <input type="checkbox"/> The anger level may vary but the person and the group are not at ease. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Useful to be able to talk to this person one-to-one or at least find out what they are wound up about before the group starts. <input type="checkbox"/> Find out what is the issue and recognise the impact this is having on the person, e.g. <i>I can see this is putting a lot of pressure on you.</i> You may be able to sympathise with the person but avoid agreeing with her or his perceptions if this may influence contributions later in the group. <input type="checkbox"/> If someone agrees that s/he is very upset, ask them if they feel they are able to take part in the group without getting more upset and without making the group feel uncomfortable. <input type="checkbox"/> Sit next to or as close to this person as you can. Your presence may inhibit some of their responses.
<p>The Rambler</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Talks off the topic or takes group away from it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Make a joke of it, e.g. <i>But we digress!</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Compliment on the range of issues they are covering and point out the need you have to focus on particular topics. <input type="checkbox"/> Put up an issues list which can be returned to at the end of the required topics, if there is time.



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<p>The Loudspeaker</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Speaks first or loudest or longest or a combination of these. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Say you want people to reflect on an issue for 15 seconds before speaking and you will signal when you are ready for responses. Choose other people to go first. <input type="checkbox"/> Point out when people are talking over or shouting down others and ask them to wait until people who have had less floor-time have contributed. <input type="checkbox"/> Explain to the person you value how much they are contributing but you have a responsibility to get everyone in the group to have their say. Ask them if they will come in towards the end of topic so as to help you. <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid eye-contact when person is talking or signal impatience by, e.g., folded arms
<p>Clinically Depressed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Makes Leonard Cohen sound like a cheer-leader. <input type="checkbox"/> There is nothing worthwhile in any part of the organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Point out you have listed several negatives <i>and are there any benefits?</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Ask what is being done or could be done to improve things?. <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Is anybody learning from this experience? or How might we learn from this experience?</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Ask how your organisation compares to other organisations in this respect and, later, what factors make your organisation compare more or less favourably?
<p>The Expert</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Wants to talk at length about what s/he knows (or thinks they know about). <input type="checkbox"/> Uses senior management status to dominate / talk down to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Maintain self-esteem of experts as far as possible. Their need to perform may stem from being unsure about themselves. <input type="checkbox"/> Make limited use of them when an “expert” opinion is needed. <input type="checkbox"/> Remind them of people who haven’t spoken or have spoken relatively little. e.g. <i>Kim can you hold that for now because we haven’t heard from Lee since the last topic?</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Make clear the group is not there to solve problems but to canvas opinions.
<p>The Presence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Is not shy but avoids being drawn in <input type="checkbox"/> Appears disdainful <input type="checkbox"/> May appear as brooding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> May not feel this is a good use of her/ his time. Emphasise how your organisation can benefit from results of this research. <input type="checkbox"/> May feel s/he is above this kind of thing. Make them feel important by acknowledging how demanding their job is, how useful their perceptions might be. <input type="checkbox"/> May resent being “volunteered”. Emphasise how your organisation seeks volunteers but relies on managers to identify people and make requests to them. Point out you would particularly like feedback on how they were selected when we get to the review section.



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<p>Point Scorer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Time wasted shooting down other people's views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Point out the focus group doesn't have to reach a consensus and it is more useful to understand the thinking behind points of view rather than contrasting them.<input type="checkbox"/> Suggest people come back to their "discussion" during break or after Focus Group.<input type="checkbox"/> Avoid getting into an argument with yourself.
<p>Uneasy Rider</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Challenges purpose of focus group in middle of topic<input type="checkbox"/> Repeated questions about why are we doing this?<input type="checkbox"/> Objects to structure used or wording of a topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Go back to what you said at beginning about the purpose and how output is used.<input type="checkbox"/> Emphasise the difficulty senior managers have in understanding how a cross-section of your organisations people are thinking. Some individuals may speak their minds but may not be representative. And more and more filters are used as information goes up the line.<input type="checkbox"/> Ask them to suspend judgement until the end of the session and you will then record in full their opinion of the group and the whole focus group process.<input type="checkbox"/> Explain benefits from previous focus groups.