A Facilitator's Intervention Strategies

Here is a five-step approach that I have used in dealing with problem behavior in a group.

Level 1: Do nothing. That's right, do nothing. See if this person will catch themselves or notice the body language of others and realize that what they are doing is not helpful.

Level 2: Refer to ground rules. If the behavior persists, remind the group in general about the ground rules, paying particular attention to the one being challenged. If there is no ground rule, suggest setting one.

Level 3: Redirect. If the behavior persists, actively intervene to move the discussion along. You may need to interrupt the speaker and redirect the conversation, or suggest a different process that avoids the opportunity for this behavior.

Level 4: Off-line Feedback. If the behavior persists, you can probably assume that the person is either clueless about their impact, frustrated with the group, or both. Help that person find a different way to express him or herself, or to accept the direction of the group.

Level 5: In-group Feedback: If the behavior continues to appear, stop the process and ask the other group members to give that person feedback about their reaction to this person's behavior and message. This can be uncomfortable and needs to be done respectfully. But my experience is you'll only have to do this once! .CMP

Terrorized ! Dealing with Group "Bullies"
By Cathy Perme

In the last few months, I have seen more than a few groups struggle with what I would call group "bullies." You know these folks – the ones that talk the loudest and most often, seem to take control, and pretty much get what they want. They may intimidate us by their sheer forcefulness, and often succeed by injecting havoc into a group. The rest of us feel as stunned as if a tidal wave had hit us. Not knowing how to react, we may respond weakly or badly, feeling foolish as the bully continues to dominate.

Now, I can't write this without admitting that I've been accused of having been a group "bully" myself at times. I earned this title when I was passionate about something that I thought was important, but no one else seemed to take any interest! But did I set out to be a bully? No.

Here are the top reasons I have found that people either bully or feel bullied by someone in a group:

1. **The purpose is not clear**. If the reason the group or team exists is murky, it creates the opportunity to impose a personal agenda, which is often the motive behind bully behavior.

2. **Meeting objectives and desired outcomes are foggy**. If there are no clear objectives for a meeting (i.e. decide "x," brainstorm about "y," etc.) a potential bully may see this as an invitation to take control.

3. **Decision-making is unclear**. This is often the case when there are other leaders or committees involved, and it is not clear who is making what decision with whose input. Someone may attempt to dominate to fill an apparent void.

4. **The rules of engagement are not spelled out**. Are group members expected to represent and advocate for others or do they represent themselves? What is the expected level of participation? How are members expected to communicate their concerns and ideas? What are the "ground rules"? If there are no stated protocols, the confusion can usher in dominating behavior.

5. **There are no consequences for adverse behavior.** Sadly, there are often "covert consequences" that have a negative impact on the people involved – such as ostracism, backbiting, or a group that slowly falls apart. The group needs to define and agree to consequences *up front* that allow interventions with unacceptable behavior on a timely basis. Otherwise, you are left hoping that a facilitator or leader will notice the problem and do something.

I have found that once these are clearly identified, bullying behavior virtually disappears. Keep in mind that people rarely set out to become "bullies" and most often just want to be heard! By setting a clear focus, decision-making norms, and rules of engagement, groups can ensure that everyone can contribute to achieving the goals of the group, respectfully and effectively. ❏