Dealing with Disagreements, Difficult People, and Difficult Group Dynamics

Adapted from: How to Make Meetings Work, by Michael Doyle and David Straus

Validating Feelings while Protecting the Group

As a facilitator, you're doing a balancing act of protecting the group and protecting individuals. You're a neutral servant for the group, but you've got useful tools. Here are four of them:

1) **Accept:** "Thomas, it looks like you don't believe we'll ever reach consensus on this."

2) **Legitimize:** "I know you're concerned. The process of coming to a consensus can be frustrating. And you may be right."

3) **Defer:** "We may not be able to come to a consensus on this now. Shall we put this in the Parking Lot and take it up at the next meeting…or address issue this right now in an up or down vote?"

4) **Graduated Response:**
   a) "Thank you, Harry. OK, Elizabeth, you're next."
   b) "OK, Harry. We've got that."
   c) "Harry, I'd really like to hear the other voices in this group. I'll come back to you."

Addressing Disagreement

(Source**:** Fundamentals of Facilitation by Aley Kent, International Rescue Committee, 2017)

Level 1: disagreements about information related to a situation
Strategy: Sheet of flip chart paper with both sides of the argument and the strengths/weaknesses of each side's suggestion

Level 1 disagreements have to do with disagreements about information related to a situation. Facilitators often can provide a great service simply by finding a way to quiet the first side and having them listen to the second side, and then quieting the second side and have them listen to the first side. Just by listening to one another, the people disagreeing often find they are not disagreeing at all!

Step 1: Delineating Alternatives

1. Start with agreement: "We seem to all agree that…"
2. Confirm the source of the disagreement: "Where we seem to disagree is… is that right?"
3. Write the issue under discussion and the alternatives on a single sheet of flip chart paper. You may choose to write them as you understand them, or ask the participants to tell you what to write.
4. For each alternative, direct specific questions at the supporter of the alternative, and record the responses on the flip chart paper. The questions should result in the group understanding details like: how much? How long? What and who is involved?

Step 2: Identifying Strengths and Weaknesses

1. Have the entire group focus on one alternative and give out the strengths of that alternative, then the strengths of the second alternative, and so on.
2. Once the strengths of each alternative have been identified, have the entire group discuss the weaknesses of each alternative. It is very important to get the strengths of both alternatives FIRST, before discussing the

weaknesses, as this gives value to each alternative before the participants have an opportunity to devalue them through the weaknesses discussion.

    a. For many disagreements, the weaknesses are equivalent to the strengths of the competing alternative. Once the group identifies this relationship, you can save time discussing the weaknesses.

    b. An alternative method is to have each of the disagreers give the strengths of the alternative they oppose, and the weaknesses of the one they support. This approach encourages active listening and helps the disagreers see the other side.

3. Once strengths and weaknesses have been identified for each alternative, check to determine if consensus has been reached.

Level 2: differences in values or experience

Strategy: Identify shared values and brainstorm new alternatives that meet these values

Since **level 2 disagreements** are based on different experiences or values, the strengths and weaknesses process can assist the group in identifying the underlying values that result in the participants supporting one alternative over another. Even if consensus has not been reached, identifying these underlying values will provide the group with a clear basis for moving forward. You as the facilitator can then use one of the other consensus-building techniques (merging, scoring/voting, etc.) to facilitate the group to consensus.

Step 3: Merging Alternatives

This is a tactic for creating a new alternative that combines the key strengths of the prior alternatives.

1. Direct the group to the strengths of each proposal.
2. Ask, "For this first alternative, what are the one or two most important strengths?" Place an asterisk next to the one or two identified.
3. Do the same for the other proposal.
4. If possible, draw a single circle that encompasses the key strengths identified from both alternatives. Ask, "Is there a way to create a new alternative that combines these strengths? Is there an alternative that is … (read the strengths)? What would it have to look like?
5. Once one or more new alternatives are identified, have the group select one which has the most promise and delineate (go back to Step 2).

Level 3: disagreement based on personality or past history

Strategy: Do not try to solve Level 3 disagreements at this meeting

A disagreement based on personality or past history (**level 3**) cannot be resolved in a facilitated session. How do you recognize a level 3 disagreement? If the argument has no logic as its base or the parties arguing show no interest in resolving the argument, then the problem is probably personality or past history. If this is so, consider the following course of action:

1. Take a break. Meet with the parties privately to indicate to them that you do not believe the issue can be solved in the session.
2. Seek agreement to go to a higher source together or a free local mediation service for resolution outside the session. In essence, let a higher level in the organization or an outside mediator help make the decision by having both parties go to together to explain the issue.
3. Don't attempt to resolve the issue in the session! Typically issues based on personality or past history take more time than you can afford to give.

Sharing Withholds

This can free up energy and clear space for the group to be in community. Have a round in which each person shares something they have been withholding from the group – that is, something they have been thinking but not saying. Withholds usually have to do with judgements and assessments about ourselves, others, or what the group is doing. The facilitator can assist by suggesting starting phrases:

- I would contribute more to the group if…
- You would understand me more if you knew that…
- Sometimes I … (describe behavior) when I feel … (describe feelings)
- If I could wave my magic wand and alter one thing in the group right now, it would be…

This exercise works best when the round is continued a few times until people feel brave enough to share what they are really withholding.

Difficult People

1) **The Latecomer**
   - Always comes in late. Causes a big commotion. Wants to get caught up.
   - *Solution:* Don't confront the person in public. Ask after the meeting why they were late. What would make the meeting important enough to be on time? Perhaps ask if they would like to be the next facilitator or note keeper.

2) **Early Leaver**
   - Leaves the meeting early, draining energy from the group.
   - *Solution:* Don't confront in front of the group. Maybe your meetings are too long or too loose. At the start of the meeting ask if everyone can stay until the end.

3) **The Broken Record**
   - Keeps bringing up same point over and over again.
   - *Solution:* Refer to the Group Memory, "Yes, Alice, we've written this down on page 3 and page 6. Is there something else you'd like to add?" "Can we take two minutes so you can let go of this and get back to the meeting?" "We need your input on other matters here."

4) **The Doubting Thomas**
   - "That will never work. That will never happen."
   - *Solution:* "Wait a minute, Harry. You and the rest of the group agreed not to judge ideas for now. You just jumped on Joe's suggestion. Hold on! You'll get a chance to evaluate later."

5) **The Headshaker**
   - Non-verbally disagrees. Rolls eyes. Crosses arms and legs.
   - *Solution:* Ignore first, but if it persists, "Harry, I see you're shaking your head. Is there something here that's bothering you?"

6) **The Dropout**
   - Sits in back and doesn't say anything. Reads a book or doodles.
   - *Solution:* Move in close and ask, "What do you think about this, Carl? I'll give you a moment to think. What's your idea, Jennifer?" (Carl may not think the meeting is relevant or is ineffective, or he's preoccupied with another matter.)

7) **The Whisperer**
   - Whispers to a neighbor, inside jokes or comments.
   - *Solution:* Walk up close or "Let's keep a single focus here (one mic)." "Do you want to share what you're talking about?" or "Do you want to take that conversation outside?" Or remind the group about their commitment to ending at the established time and their goals for the meeting.

8) **The Loudmouth**
   - Talks too much or too loud. Dominates the meeting. Often a senior person or decision maker.
   - *Solution:* Move in close, maintaining eye contact. Shift your focus and call on someone else in the room. Ask after the meeting what the underlying issue is. Offer a pen and pad to write ideas down they come up with. Or offer them the position of note taker.

9) The Attacker
- Launches personal attacks on another group member or the facilitator.
- *Solution:* "What's all this about? What's going on here?" Walk over to the recorder and ask the attacker to see if their opinion has been captured correctly.

10) The Interpreter
- "What Alberto is trying to say is…"
- *Solution:* "Hold it a minute, George. Let Alberto finish what he wanted to say." Or, if Alberto has finished speaking, "Alberto, do you think that George understood what you said?" Take a moment to 'stack' the speakers. Point to raised hands and say "I see you, you next, then you."

11) The Gossiper
- "Well, I heard them say that…"
- *Solution:* "Are you sure?" "Can anyone else verify that?" then take a short break to look it up, make a phone call, or invite an expert to the next meeting.

12) The Know-it–all
- "Well, I'm the one with the PhD"
- *Solution:* "Yes, we realize this is your specialty, and you may be right, but the reason we're having this meeting is to get the group's insights on other solutions."

13) The Backseat Driver
- "Well, I'd move on to the next topic if I were you."
- *Solution:* Acknowledge that there are many ways of facilitating a meeting. In an *extreme* case, you may have to challenge the Backseat Driver openly, "Do you want to facilitate the meeting? If you do that's fine, but if you don't, allow me the courtesy to move through our agenda."

14) The Busy Body
- Ducking in and out of the meeting, taking calls, etc.
- *Solution:* Before the meeting, ask the Busy Body to hold all calls for an hour, or move the meeting to a different place with less distractions or a quieter time. Ask for a commitment to block off the time for the meeting. When it happens, say, "Hey, I thought you promised to hold all calls until the end of this meeting?"

15) The Joker
- Constant goofing around
- *Solution:* For non-serious cases, "OK, folks, lets re-focus." For serious cases, aim for a break as soon as possible. People can get unruly when they're worn out.

16) The Drifter
- Moves from topic to topic. Brings up completely new issues.
- *Solution:* The Drifter may be sharing creative new ideas. Ask the drifter to write their idea down. Ask the group if they want to pursue this now, go back to the agenda, or add it to the Bike Rack for another time.

17) The Rambler
- Has difficult time coming to the point
- *Solution*: State appreciation for the thought. Try to re-phrase, "Is this what you mean?" "So it sounds like you're saying…" Ask the room to help this person out. Be sure to go back to the person and ask if that captures their idea.

Difficult Group Dynamics

Adapted from: Fundamentals of Facilitation by Aley Kent

1) **Low participation by the entire group**
   - *Solution:* Switch from large group open discussion to a different format that lowers anxiety level. Idea-listing can work well. If safety is a major concern, small group activities with feedback unattached to individuals are important.
   - Use "balancing" methods to create an opening for more opinions or ideas: "what do others think?" "Are there other ways of looking at this?" "Who else has an idea?" "What was said at table 2?" "Is this discussion raising questions for anyone?"

2) **Poor follow-through on tasks**
   - *Solution:* Have people do assignments in teams – try to get teams started on work during the main meeting to break through inertia.
   - Build a report-back process at a midpoint before assignments are due. This gives anyone having trouble a chance to get help.

3) **Failure to start and end on time**
   - Start when you say you're going to start (waiting encourages lateness)
   - If you go overtime, call a break so people can "phone home"
   - If going overtime is recurrent, improve your agenda planning