

Module 12, Lesson 4 Handout:

Handling Difficult Group Participants

Let's be real: not every group or lesson is going to go perfectly. It's vital to be prepared to handle difficult situations so that you can handle yourself professionally and come out feeling good about how you managed the situation. The rest of your group is going to be watching you, remember, and adversity is a great way to earn the respect of people who you want to feel favorably towards you.

Here are some situations that may occur and how you can best handle them:

The participant makes an incorrect statement. If a participant makes a statement to the group, like “my doctor says not to eat eggs because of my cholesterol,” you can't just leave that “bad” information hanging in the room. You can choose how you want to remedy it respectfully, but you have to do just that. Be delicate. “Actually, the newest research says that it is OK to eat eggs even if you have high cholesterol. Can I take a minute to speak about what the latest science reveals?”

The participant wants to corner you on YOUR beliefs. If you have a participant who gets personal, you don't need to go there. Maybe he says “Do you eat GMOs?” Rather than answering your personal beliefs, ask the group their thoughts and then speak to the research. Sometimes sharing personal beliefs makes sense, but before you do ask yourself if you think it will benefit the group. Also consider if any participants will feel judged or excluded by the information that you share.

The silent treatment. Yikes. This one is really hard. Why isn't a participant engaged? There could be a zillion reasons, right? They're bored, not interested, forced to be there, have a headache, had a bad day, are feeling inferior, are feeling superior . . . you name it. Try to figure out what is going on with the participant. Make eye contact and maybe invite them to participate by asking directly if they have anything to add. Sometimes breaking into smaller groups or doing a hands on activity like a food demonstration or a journaling exercise helps to engage them.

Bone to pick. If you have someone who is really, really negative, it can really be derailing. The best way to handle this is to ask the rest of the group how they feel. If you're engaging the rest of the audience, you'll bring some positivity to the room.

Side conversations. This will happen a lot. They can come from a place of disrespect, but more often than not, the side conversations are related to the subject. Still, they're distracting. Come up with how you feel comfortable handling that. Maybe say, “One conversation at a time, please!” or

pause the group until they finish, feeling a little uncomfortable for getting called out. Sometimes just eye contact works.

On the attack. If you have a participant who is just hostile, angry, abrasive or negative, you can remind them to be respectful, you can ask them about their feelings, you can use humor “I didn’t know I needed a bodyguard today” or you can ask them for honest feedback on what they’d prefer. Sometimes people have great ideas and suggestions but just don’t know the right way to express them and it comes off as negativity.

Domination. If you have a participant who feels like she is the expert and doesn’t stop imparting wisdom, or if you have someone who dominates by answering everything and not letting anyone else get a word in, or if you have a rambler who goes on and on and on...you may need to have a few phrases that you’ve practiced to politely interrupt them and turn the floor over. It can be as simple as “Wow, it sounds like you have a lot to say and a lot of knowledge. Let’s give someone else a chance to share.” Or you may say, “Thank you so much. Let’s start with that! Does anyone have anything to add?” Maybe a compliment would help. Something like “You have a lot of energy and experience to share. I’m going to take the floor for a minute to get us back on track.”

Not every group lesson is going to go as planned. In addition to difficult participants, you’ll experience technical difficulties, last minute room changes, traffic that makes you run late, missing items from your demo bag, power outages... who knows! Sometimes being able to think on your feet is necessary for handling any tough situation that comes your way and this gets easier over time with experience. Ultimately, if your lesson plan is solid and you’re confident in what you present, you’ll be able to handle it all.