



Dealing with challenging behaviors

Translational Ecology Short Course
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**“Rudeness is the weak man’s imitation
of strength.” *Edmund Burke***

Challenging behaviors and situations: A partial list

- ▶ Dominating the discussion / talking too much
- ▶ Repeatedly going off topic
- ▶ Attacks on others (participants, convener and/or facilitator)
- ▶ Passivity – unwillingness to participate
- ▶ Hammering away at a single personal agenda
- ▶ Total inflexibility
- ▶ General negativity (sarcasm, disruption, behavior signaling disapproval)
- ▶ Circumventing the process (lobbying, litigation, media)
- ▶ Abuse of social media platforms
- ▶ Inconsistent participation
- ▶ Holding side conversations
- ▶ Others...

Some things to think about *before you act...*

Primary assumption: The facilitator has the responsibility to maintain engagement, civility, decorum, and safety within the group/process

- ▶ Never take things personally – however personal they are intended
- ▶ Remind yourself, and the group, what you're all trying to achieve
- ▶ Ask yourself: what's the source of the behavior – is there a justifiable reason for it?
- ▶ Go back to basics: positions vs. interests
- ▶ Do the math – how important is this person to the goals of the process? What do you risk by offending, marginalizing, or excluding them?

Some basic ways of dealing with challenging behaviors (1)

- ▶ Develop strong working agreements, and get buy in from participants on them
- ▶ Develop and get agreement on a basic document that clearly defines the scope of the process
- ▶ Appeal to the group as a whole to name and deal with the behavior
- ▶ Deal with the individual privately during breaks or between meetings

Some basic ways of dealing with challenging behaviors (2)

- ▶ Find intermediaries willing to approach the individual separately
- ▶ Use humor to defuse tension
- ▶ Create a structure to confine (or isolate) the individual
- ▶ Change the structure of the process to exclude the individual, but find ways of keeping them informed/engaged
- ▶ Stop and ask the group how/ whether they would like to proceed

Example 1: Passivity (unwillingness to participate)

- ▶ Use alternative forms of participation – encourage round robin feedback, break into smaller groups, provide written opportunities to contribute ideas
- ▶ Change the topic - identify their particular interest and give them a more prominent role in something they feel is more relevant to their interests
- ▶ Check in with them in private: Are they shy? slower to respond? do they feel intimidated or frustrated? are there complicated internal dynamics at play?
- ▶ Use written evaluations to ensure good feedback

Example 2: Personal attacks

- ▶ Try to identify challenging personalities and dynamics through pre-meeting work
- ▶ Develop strong working agreements and protocols to set appropriate norms
- ▶ Immediately step in, identify the behavior, and refer to the agreed upon working agreements
- ▶ Harness the energy of the group to help the individual(s) understand that the behavior isn't tolerated
- ▶ Speak to the person separately/privately to identify their actions, remind them of appropriate behavior and discuss the consequences