Dealing with challenging behaviors

Translational Ecology Short Course
Southwest Climate Science Center
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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