Intervention Strategies for Challenging Participants
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How to identify tensions?

- Evaluate the situation periodically. If it is a pressing matter, take action right away even if it breaks the flow.
- Possible issues:
  - Conflicts or altercations;
  - Apathy or non-participation;
  - Inadequate decision-making;
- Possible reasons:
  - Unclear objectives;
  - Activity is not very significant for the participant or not adapted to the group’s abilities;
  - The experience to share is too difficult (vulnerability, "what will others think of me?");
  - The level of group cohesion is low: discomfort, lack of confidence;
  - Little positive reinforcement; low self-esteem;
  - Lack of information;
  - Difficulty communicating or complying with communication rules.

What to do when losing control of the group?

- Take a coffee break. Think quickly about possible causes;
- Act on the cause: often, focusing on the verbal, nonverbal and asking ourselves questions: is it the activity? Is it because some are not respecting others opinions? Then act...

What to do when a participant is resistant to what is proposed?

- Causes of resistance:
  - Misunderstanding, fear of losing because of change (status quo gains: comfort, skills, status, etc.), self-esteem, fear of rejection, reaction to awareness, resistance to an error made by the facilitator (questioning credibility or perspective, for example).
- Possible interventions:
  - In some cases, not reacting is the perfect solution since the behavior could stop by itself. When the behavior persists, however, we must act...
  - In general, it is preferable to recognize this resistance and to:
    - Listen, support and continue the session; or
    - Listen, briefly support and offer to talk about it during the break or after the group meeting to not take up the group’s time; or
    - Point out the impact that the resistance has on the group’s learning and ask that the behavior stop, and ask to talk about it individually after the meeting.

What to do when people do not participate?

- Assess the situation:
  - Are the instructions clear?
  - Is the subject too complex or too ‘delicate’ (especially at the beginning of training when trust is not yet established)?
  - Are people reluctant to the concepts presented?
  - Does the training meet the needs or expectations of participants?

- Intervene according to your analysis of the situation:
  - Organize an icebreaker activity;
  - Ask questions or do a less threatening activity;
  - Explain the purpose of the training and leave room for emotions following the situation;
  - Explain the concept and the impact or importance of that concept with supporting evidence;
  - Ask the group: "I notice that..."

What to do when someone verbalizes (or acts) their dissatisfaction?
(For example, sitting at the back of the room or in withdrawal, negative comments, arms crossed, facial expressions, etc.)

- If the behavior is visible upon arrival, you could:
  - Talk to the person (assess the situation);
  - State the rules during the introduction (emphasize respect for the learning experience of others);
  - Clearly state the goal of the training and the intended impact it will have on their work.

- If the behavior happens during the training:
  - Allow the participant(s) to express themselves: e.g. "What do you think of the information presented so far? OR "What are the challenges associated with this activity?"
  - Remind participants of the rules and / or restate the purpose of the training;
  - Intervene directly if necessary: "Mr. Jones, I notice that ... I would ask you to... so as not to interfere with the experience of others" OR "Mr. Jones, I am available at the break to discuss your training experience."
  - If the behavior continues, can we ask the person to leave the room?

What to do when someone is constantly talking and disrupts the group?

- Examples of possible verbal interventions:
  - "Nicole, do you have something interesting to share with the group?"
  - "Nathalie, could I ask you to avoid private conversations, it prevents me from concentrating and it is disturbing for the group."
  - If several people are talking: "There are several simultaneous conversations. What is going on?"

What to do if someone takes over the conversation(s)?

- Examples of possible verbal interventions:
  - "Joey, if I understand your point of view... (The leader summarizes)."
  - "Lynn, if you allow, I will ask the opinion of... / I will give the chance to another participant. And if we have time, I'll come back to you."
  - If necessary, remind participants of the communication rules.

What to do when a participant criticizes you or the training?

- Recognize and listen;
- Ask for clarification if needed;
• Analyze the comments and react with a concise answer:
  o Offer a solution, if possible;
  o Redirect the question or critical comment to the group for their opinion and most likely their support: "I would like to hear the perspective of the rest of the group on this issue."
  o Answer vaguely (e.g. "This is another way of seeing the situation" or "I take note of it.")
• Take note of the comment.

**What to do when a comment is inappropriate?**

• Listen;
• Pause, if necessary;
• Say why the comment is inappropriate;
• Ask the participant to reformulate his comment or criticism;
• Be authentic: "Natasha, this remark is... I would ask you to rephrase it please."
• Avoid the following behaviors because they fuel conflict: accusing, blaming, insulting, interrupting, not listening carefully, and making unreasonable demands;
• Instead, try to: understand the other's point of view, use calm non-verbal and body language, actively seek common ground, admit you are wrong, and apologize sincerely...


**Personal notes:**

**Other resources:**
### Possible resolutions for common discussion fears

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<th>Problem</th>
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<th>Possible strategies</th>
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<td><strong>Silent Group</strong></td>
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<td>There may not be enough time to respond.</td>
<td>- Many instructors only wait 2-3 seconds after asking a question. Instead, set an expectation: “Think individually for a minute”.</td>
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| Students may not know how to interact. | - Make sure that the discussion expectations are clear.  
- Consider assigning roles (e.g. questioner, resource provider, support, and summarizer). | |
| Students may be shy or afraid to speak in public. | - Try working from pairs, to small groups of three or four, before turning to larger group discussion. This will allow students to test their ideas.  
- Help students get to know each other (e.g. icebreakers and name tags).  
- Let students know the discussion questions in advance so that they can prepare. | |
| Questions may not be designed to elicit responses. | - Design higher thinking questions in advance using Bloom’s taxonomy.  
- Questions should be open, structured, clear and concise (Rasmussen, 1989). | |
| Topic may be too easy or appear boring. | - Motivate the students by learning their interests, and connecting the topic to these interests.  
- Try varying the structure of the discussion. | |
| Students may not see the point of discussion. | - Be explicit about why you are using discussion, and its advantages to them (i.e. transferable skills that will be of benefit in searching for a job, or the ability to develop a deeper understanding with longer retention). | |
| Language barriers may exist | - Define jargon used  
- Ensure any questions or instructions are written as well as spoken.  
- Allow time for people to check their understanding with a partner.  
- Encourage students to ask for clarification or repetition. | |
| **Dominating member** | | |
| The member may think he or she is helping the discussion. | - Consider speaking with the student individually. Identify strengths and areas of development.  
- Initiate a group feedback session (Peer Feedback form, Appendix B).  
- Redirect the discussion: “That is an interesting comment. I’m going to hold you there, to allow others to contribute”.  
- Sit next to the dominating member in future classes.  
- Use the strategies for a silent group to help increase participation from other members. | |
| The member may wish to improve his or her grade. | - Clarify the method used to assess discussion participation.  
- Develop a rubric with the class that includes a definition of quality contributions. | |
| The member may not be aware of the impact of the behaviour. | - Use methods similar to those above.  
- Consider subdividing the group to allow more time for other members. | |
| **Aggressive member** | | |
| Aggression may mask insecurity. | - Speak with the student outside of class to find alternative methods of participating. | |
| The member may not realize his or her behaviour is perceived as aggressive. | - There may be cultural or disciplinary differences with regards to how one interacts in a group. It may be possible to initiate a private or group conversation about different dynamics and the way they are perceived.  
- Some of the strategies for a dominating member may be useful. | |
### Aggressive member

The student may believe his or her knowledge or perspective is more valuable than others.

- Try an activity that can only be solved using a variety of perspectives or backgrounds.
- Ask students to write down the three most important points raised during a discussion. The fact that points other than their own are raised may increase their awareness of the value of other members.

### The student is unreasonable.

- Address the issue as quickly as possible.
- Refer to the established norms of acceptable behaviour overtly.
- Explain the behaviour’s impact and why it is unacceptable.
- If necessary, ask the person to leave.

### Students may have found a more interesting topic.

- Not all tangents are bad. Sometimes, a tangent leads into a more fruitful area than the one you had planned. Bring the value of the topic to the attention of the students.

### People may not be aware of the purpose of the discussion, and so unaware that they are off topic.

- Clarify the purpose of the discussion at the beginning, or through an agenda, and remind students. Leave the points visible for people to refer to.
- Record relevant points (on the board or on a slide) to help students see the progress they are making.
- Ask students to make the connections — “Can you help me connect that idea with...?”

### Students may have run out of ideas.

- Prepare backup questions that will guide students.
- Let students know a time limit, and set the time based on the depth of discussion needed.
- Bring the discussion to a close and move on to a new topic.

### Students may be socializing.

- It may be important for group dynamics to allow some time for groups to develop social connections. The important thing is to balance the allotted time.
- When students work in small groups, schedule time for reporting results to the whole group at the end (verbally or on flip chart size sheet of paper).
- A handout with sections to complete could help structure a discussion.

### Students do not see preparation as useful.

- Ensure that preparation is useful.
- Explain the use to the students in their terms.

### People have forgotten.

- If preparation is unusual, send a reminder by e-mail, or have the instructions written down. Most people forget instructions that are given verbally at the end of a class.
- Try to make preparation a regular part of the class, so students are in the habit of preparing.
- Build a check (e.g. a one-paragraph answer to a question that helps focus attention to a reading and must be submitted before the activity, or which must be submitted online in advance).

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