

A RESPECTFUL MEETING POLICY

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As high-conflict personalities appear to be increasing in society and the workplace, we are hearing more reports of disrespectful behavior during business meetings these days. Sad to say that this even is a topic which needs to be addressed. But since much of today's work goes on in meetings, we are developing some methods that anyone can use who is faced with this issue.

Disrespectful Behavior

Disrespectful meeting behavior can include: constantly interrupting the meeting chairperson or other participants, opposing the pre-planned agenda, inviting inappropriate people to the meeting, coming late and disrupting the progress of the meeting, taking calls in front of others, unnecessarily surfing the Internet, disparaging remarks or disregard for women or younger employees or older employees, yelling, dramatically walking out, throwing paper, and so forth.

It is especially difficult when the disruptive person(s) has needed information, but is behaving in this manner. Some people are oblivious to their impact on the group discussion, while others enjoy the power they have to be disruptive because they have needed information and see themselves as superior to the group.

Regardless of the motivations, here are five suggestions:

1. Post a Policy

Whether a policy is posted on the wall of a meeting room, or on small cards on a table, it can help set the tone for a meeting, especially if there are outsiders who don't know how meetings are run at a particular office. It shows the organization's support for respectful meetings from the top on down. This can be similar to No Smoking signs or other common warnings. The policy could say something like this:

Respectful Meeting Policy

"At A____ Company, much of our work is accomplished at meetings. In order to ensure the smooth, respectful and efficient management of meetings, the meeting chair shall manage the Agenda and the right of members to speak. On rare occasion, a meeting member may become disrespectful in communicating their information and opinions. In such a case, the meeting chair shall ask the meeting member to revise their manner of speech to be respectful. In the event that the meeting member does not thereafter speak respectfully, the chair may announce a short break or end the meeting, in the meeting chair's discretion. Other meeting members shall support the chair in making such decisions."

With such a policy announcement somewhere, a meeting chairperson can refer to it in the event that someone becomes disruptive or disrespectful. It will also strengthen the other group members to support the chairperson in enforcing this policy. Furthermore, it shows that the organization values the input of everyone and will not tolerate individuals who attempt to hijack the agenda or the running of a meeting.

2. Immediate Intervention by Meeting Chair

When such disruptions or disparaging remarks occur, many meeting chairs are caught off-guard, and they stop and just listen to the disruptive person. It can be quite jarring when someone suddenly goes in the opposite direction of the meeting. In such cases, the meeting chair is encouraged to immediately assert their role as chair of the meeting and interrupt the disruptive person. They can say something like:

“We appreciate your interest in expressing your point of view. However, this is not the right time [or right manner] for you to do so. Please hold off for now [or speak in a calmer tone], so that we can stay focused on our Agenda. Now, we were discussing...”

And then the meeting chair should change eye contact to the others in the room. By quickly doing this, the disruptive person does not gain traction or attention for being disruptive. This is especially important in volunteer organizations, nonprofits and other groups where everyone else is trying to be nice. Unfortunately, when dealing with a high-conflict person, you have to be immediate and assertive, otherwise they will hijack the meeting.

3. Other Participants Support the Meeting Chairperson

One of the common characteristics of high-conflict people is that they are always recruiting negative advocates. So it is not unusual that a meeting disrupter turns to other meeting members for support in challenging the agenda and taking over the meeting. Or making a disparaging remark and then turning to other meeting members to try to get a laugh out of them. Generally, when meeting participants realize this dynamic, they will just avoid paying attention to the disrupter, so that the meeting chair can maintain control of the meeting.

Another way that participants can be helpful is to gently admonish the person making disparaging remarks or being otherwise disruptive, but saying something like:

“That’s enough, Joe.” And then turning their attention back to the meeting chair.

It isn’t necessary to stop everything to give a long speech about how inappropriate someone else is being. This can be done very quickly, with a minimum of effort.

In some cases, the whole group can just stay focused on the meeting chair and not give the disruptive person any attention at all. Since the goal of most high-conflict people is to get attention, this will either slow them down or they will leave.

4. Establish the Agenda in Advance

One of the easiest ways to get group support for the meeting is to give people an opportunity to contribute to the Agenda in advance of the meeting. Then, the final meeting Agenda can be posted or distributed before the meeting occurs.

Then, it is very difficult for a meeting disrupter to hijack the Agenda. Often they want to throw out the Agenda and replace it with their seemingly much more urgent issue. Or they sometimes say that the presumptions underlying today’s Agenda are all wrong, so we have to go back to start. They say: “It’s pointless to proceed until we have this larger discussion.” (Such as the group’s goals.) While that might be a good idea at some point, it doesn’t mean that anyone gets to hijack today’s meeting and the Agenda that has already been prepared.

If they attempt to do that, the meeting chairperson can simply say: “We all agreed on this Agenda in advance, so please stop raising this new issue now. You’ll have to save it for another day.”

5. Disinvite the Meeting Disrupter to Future Meetings

When there is a continual meeting disrupter or disrespectful person, it may be necessary to disinvite them to future meetings, so that the group can get on with the business at hand. In some cases, if the person has needed knowledge or information, they may attend by video or phone. Ironically, when this has been done, high-conflict people still engage in their disruptive behavior—although it is less disruptive and can be turned off. This is an example of how stuck some high-conflict people can be.

Conclusion

Hopefully, most people have not faced this problem yet. However, it does appear to be increasing and you will be better off to be prepared—rather than caught by surprise—by having suggestions such as these readily available.

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