

## How to Handle Difficult Participants

All trainers have to manage difficult participants at one time or another. Whether the difficult participant is a talker or know-it-all, a fighter or arguer, a quiet or withdrawn person, a complainer, an unconsciously incompetent person, a distracter, or a rambler, the trainer needs to know what to do and what not to do when handling the behavior, and how to avoid taking the behavior personally. This article will discuss how to handle each of these seven difficult and disruptive behaviors in turn.

### **1. The Talker**

The Talker or Know-It-All has opinions on every subject and states them in a very authoritative manner. Other participants and the trainer find it hard to disagree with or to give help to this person.

#### **What a Trainer Can Do:**

##### **In front of the group:**

- Thank the person and move on to the next subject.
- Ask others to comment on his remarks.
- Thank the person for his participation and indicate it is time to hear from others.
- Tactfully ask the person to give someone else a chance.
- Use humor to invite others to speak up.
- Deliberately turn to others and ask for their opinions.
- Cut across the person's flow of talk with a summarizing statement.
- Avoid looking at the person.
- Pretend you don't hear the person and call on someone else.
- Acknowledge the person's expertise or experience and ask permission to call on them for specific examples.
- Set rules: only the person who has the Koosh can speak, or there is a 2 minute limit per person, etc.

##### **In private:**

- Ask the person to serve as a mentor to others in the session, only offering answers when requested.
- Give the person an assignment to facilitate a small group discussion, with clear instructions intended to maximize listening and minimize talking.
- Request that the person prepare a portion of the content or offer an example to support the content at a specified time in the session.
- Provide constructive feedback about the impact of the behavior on the session, the participants, and/or the trainer.
- Coach the person to select more constructive behavior.

- Co-opt the person- ask for his assistance.

**What a Trainer Should NOT Do:**

- Compete with the person.
- Insult the person.
- Stifle the person's enthusiasm.
- Get defensive.
- Express anger.
- Let the person control the discussion.

**Commentary:** When confronted with any difficult behavior, we need to be able to step back and objectively assess what might be the root cause of the behavior. Why would someone need to talk all the time?

The individual may simply be responding to what he thinks people expect of him. Sometimes, people keep talking because they don't feel that their knowledge, experience, or expertise are appreciated. In that case, giving them a specific role in presenting the content, or providing examples that show the content in action, or asking them to serve as a mentor to others in the session or at their small table, can do wonders.

At times, people speak up because they are enthusiastically engaged in the subject and really want to share what they know. In this case, we want to thank them and acknowledge their participation in a positive way- and indicate that we want to make sure others can voice their opinions.

In all cases, we should address the individual and discuss the behavior with respect, so that she can retain his or her dignity.

**2. The Fighter or Arguer**

The Fighter or Arguer is quick to find fault with the material or instructor. She picks apart statements in an inappropriate way. The Fighter often is angry, but will not come out and admit or explain the anger.

**Special Note:** Some people have an argumentative style, or like to devil's advocate to ensure a lively debate. Their motivation and behavior is not fueled by anger or deep frustration. As a result, they are more easily brought back into the fold through the milder actions suggested below.

**What a Trainer Can Do:****In front of the group:****If it is an attack on the topic:**

- Keep your cool- you will never win the argument.
- Acknowledge the level of passion and ask for the reason behind it.
- Request that the person back up assertions. Ask for evidence.
- Avoid getting personal.
- Refer the question to the group and then to him.
- Try to win this person over by finding some good reasons to agree with some points.
- Pretend not to hear him.
- Agree to disagree.
- If nothing else works, suggest that your differences be cleared up later.
- Use humor to invite others to speak up.
- Set rules: only the person who has the Koosh can speak, or there is a 2 minute limit per person, etc.
- Set rules: criticism is acceptable, as long as it is constructive and offers viable alternatives.

**If the arguer may be a spokesperson for the group:**

- Determine whether the person is alone in his thinking, or if others feel the same way.
- If others agree, it may be appropriate to say: "I am not here to defend the content. I am here to explain it and teach you how to use it."
- At other times, it may be appropriate to allow a limited amount of time for group venting or for posting constructive recommendations from the group.

**If it is a personal attack:**

- Ignore the attack.
- Reframe an attack on you as an attack on the problem.
- Reframe a personal attack as friendly.
- Reframe from past wrongs to future remedies.
- Reframe from "you" and "me" to "we."

**In private:**

- Provide constructive feedback about the impact of the behavior on the session, the participants, and/or the trainer.
- Coach the person to select more constructive behavior.
- Co-opt the person- ask for his assistance.

- Discuss the true source of the individual's anger.
- Ask if the person is willing to let the other participants learn.
- If necessary, indicate that the person is free to leave the session.

**What a Trainer Should NOT Do:**

- Argue with the person.
- Insult the person.
- Get defensive.
- Express anger.
- Let the person control the discussion.
- Agree with the fighter just to end the argument, if that will mislead other participants.

**Commentary:** When confronted with any difficult behavior, we need to be able to step back and objectively assess what might be the root cause of the behavior. Why would someone fight or argue with a trainer?

Anger is a basic human emotion, and this complex world offers many legitimate reasons why someone might be angry.

The person may resent having to come to the training session, particularly if attendance at the session is mandatory- or even last minute. I've had folks come into a training session understandably furious because they had been notified of the session with a note on their windshields the night before!

The person may disagree with the content, or have difficulty with authority figures (yes, that means the trainer!), or simply be having a very bad day.

The person may dislike the trainer, be angry about the quality of the coffee or the lack of refreshments, or be troubled by some issue at home.

Often, I have found that the training session is the only time, and perhaps even the very first time, that the participants are together and can discuss how they feel. The issue may have little to do with the actual training content, but some participant will find a way to bring it up.

Sometimes, the group will direct their anger or frustration at the trainer, because they view the trainer as an extension of management (and probably easier to confront than a real manager). Sometimes, the group will feel safe to express their frustration because they hope that the trainer can have some impact as their advocate with management.

Dr. Madeline Hunter taught that trainers must continually make decisions, before, during and after the training, to increase the probability that learning will occur. Argument and angry confrontation in the classroom truly test that teaching. We need to balance the

needs of the participants while still achieving the set goals of the training program.. So we make decisions intended to defuse, deflect, or reframe the anger- because we know that no learning will occur while the anger persists. We do our best to dignify the person, while setting controls around the behavior.

For those of us who are conflict-averse, managing the Fighter or Arguer may be a real challenge. Yet it is necessary for us to effectively meet that challenge, or we will lose credibility and control in the classroom. And, if we lose control in that situation, our participants may not feel safe enough to continue in the session.

### **3. The Quiet One or Withdrawer.**

The Quiet One or Withdrawer is non-participative and passive in the group. This individual does not make an effort to become part of the discussion. The Withdrawer can be shy, depressed, afraid, tired, or have a negative attitude towards the group, instructor, or the process.

**Special Note:** This behavior may be difficult for a trainer who is seeking interaction and response. However, the participant may not intend to be difficult. Some learners are very cerebral and deliberate. They need time to absorb and reflect on the content. Their method of actively participating may be by taking copious notes or listening very carefully.

This person may be very shy and uncomfortable speaking up in large groups.

There may be a political reason: higher level management may be in the room and the person may not feel comfortable speaking up in front of them.

Then again, this may be passive/aggressive behavior intended to make a statement through lack of participation.

#### **What a Trainer Can Do:**

##### **In front of the group:**

- Treat the participant with respect.
- Build in time at the beginning of each interactive exercise for participants to read and work independently before they begin their group discussions.
- Engage the participant by posing a question that directly relates to her situation or concern.
- Subtly incorporate the person into the group by using her name in hypothetical examples or stories.
- Have participants pair off rather than working immediately in large or small groups. This will be more comfortable for the shy person.
- Always offer observer roles as options for role plays, games, or simulations.
- Call this individual by name and ask for an opinion.

- Ask an easy question that she is sure to answer well, then praise her.
- Draw this person out.

**If the Withdrawer has chosen a very overt behavior to trumpet her choice not to participate:**

- Draw the person outside the room, either during an exercise or at a break..
- Determine the reason for the behavior.
- Explain the impact of the behavior on the group and the instructor.
- Offer options: to participate or to leave the session.

**In private:**

- During a break, ask the person whether the training is meeting her needs, or simply engage in small talk. Sometimes, that personal interaction will create sufficient comfort for the person to begin speaking up in class.
- Get permission from the individual to relate a story or example that she told you that is relevant to the training content.
- Name the behavior and ask if there is anything that you can do differently so that the participant will feel more comfortable speaking up.
- Provide constructive feedback about the impact of the behavior on the session, the participants, and/or the trainer.
- Coach the person to select more constructive behavior.
- Co-opt the person- ask for her assistance.

**What a Trainer Should NOT Do:**

- Jump to the conclusion that the participant is choosing to be difficult.
- Interpret the participant's lack of verbal response as an indication of lack of interest.
- Get defensive.
- Focus all of his attention on trying to engage the quiet one.
- Ignore the participant.

**Commentary:** When confronted with any difficult behavior, we need to be able to step back and objectively assess what might be the root cause of the behavior. Why would someone withdraw from the class in such a quietly aggressive manner?

If you ask her, you may find that her reasons are very legitimate. She may not feel that her needs, her expertise, her prior training, or her time is respected by her managers. So she expresses her anger in a passive-aggressive manner. In essence, she conducts her own nonviolent protest.

When the difficult behavior begins almost immediately, we can be relatively certain that WE are not the problem. The issues walked in with the participant.

It might be helpful in these circumstances if we had a pile of envelopes available. We could then ask the participants to take a sheet of paper, write down whatever is troubling them, and put the folded paper into the envelope. The envelope should be sealed and placed behind the last page of the participant packet or folder. We can assure them that the issues will be there at the end of the session, but for now they won't have to worry about them. They can just relax and enjoy the class.

## **5. The Complainer.**

The Complainer complains about anything and everything, including: the room, materials, topics, instructor, organization, weather, refreshments, etc. Her focus is on what is wrong or bad rather than on what is right or good.

### **What a Trainer Can Do:**

#### **In front of the group:**

##### **If the complaint is valid:**

- Acknowledge the validity of the complaint;
- Apologize for the inconvenience;
- Determine the desired remedy;
- Indicate what will be done to address it (if anything can be done);
- Identify the time necessary to implement the resolution;
- Thank the person for bringing up the issue;
- Initiate action to resolve the issue; and
- Move on.

##### **If the complaint is not valid:**

- Apologize for the person's distress.
- Clarify your distance from the decision that generated the complaint.
- Explain that the desired recourse is not possible.
- Use humor to defuse the situation.
- Avoid getting personal.
- Refer the issue to the rest of the group, to show that the concern is not shared.
- Pretend not to hear her.
- Set rules: criticism is acceptable, as long as it is constructive and offers viable alternatives.

**If the Complainer may be a spokesperson for the group:**

- Determine whether the person is alone in her thinking, or if others feel the same way.
- If others agree, it may be appropriate to say: "I am not here to defend the content. I am here to explain it and teach you how to use it."
- At other times, it may be appropriate to allow a limited amount of time for group venting or for posting constructive recommendations from the group.

**In private:**

- Provide constructive feedback about the impact of the behavior on the session, the participants, and/or the trainer.
- Coach the person to select more constructive behavior.
- Co-opt the person- ask for her assistance.
- Discuss the true source of the individual's complaint.
- Ask if the person is willing to let the other participants learn.
- If necessary, indicate that the person is free to leave the session.

**What a Trainer Should NOT Do:**

- Argue with the person.
- Insult the person.
- Get defensive.
- Express anger.
- Let the person control the discussion.
- Agree with the complainer just to end the argument, if that will mislead other participants.

**Commentary:** When confronted with any difficult behavior, we need to be able to step back and objectively assess what might be the root cause of the behavior. Why would someone complain?

If the complaint is valid, there probably is some workload or organizational issue that is distressing. The person needs to vent and the trainer is a relatively safe person.

If the complaint is not valid, the person is probably feeling victimized and outraged by something and needs to let off steam. It is important to treat the person with respect but put clear limits on the person's ability to express those complaints.

Here is a wonderful technique to minimize disruption. Hand each participant 3 poker chips at the beginning of the session. Indicate that they may vent three times for 30



seconds at a time, handing in a chip for each venting session. Once the participant has used up his or her poker chips, she may not complain any more.

A variation on this is to give each person 2 cents and indicate that she can put her “two cents’ worth” into a discussion for 30 seconds. Again, once the 2 cents have been handed to the trainer, that person has no further opportunities to complain.

Obviously, you can create your own rules and process. Just make sure to be clear about the rules at the beginning of the session and implement them consistently.

## **6. The Unconsciously Incompetent.**

The Unconsciously Competent person thinks that he already has the correct knowledge, skills, and ability, when in truth he doesn’t. This person complains that attending the training session is a waste of time. He doesn’t feel the need to participate, since he is so certain he already knows everything.

### **What a Trainer Can Do:**

#### **In front of the group:**

- In the introduction, mention that the collective expertise in the room far exceeds your own- and request their input and assistance so that everyone can learn what they need to learn. Also mention that you appreciate that some folks may feel the training is unnecessary. However, someone other than yourself decided that everyone should attend so they could have the same knowledge and vocabulary. If anyone is feeling stressed about having to attend, invite that person to consider it an opportunity to become more conscious of what he is doing correctly. At the very least, suggest that they consider it a time to relax, be entertained, and get to know each other better.
- Begin with a focus question that will determine the extent of all of the participants’ knowledge of the topic. Split the participants into two groups to brainstorm and post their answers on flip charts. This will not put the unconsciously incompetent person on the spot, but will make clear to all participants what they know and do not know when the trainer adds in information.
- Follow this with a questionnaire that asks questions regarding all of the key points to be covered. First, have all participants complete the questionnaire independently. Then have them discuss their answers within the small table groups. Tell them they can change their answers, but they need to be able to report out the correct answer and the rationale for the answer. Debrief the answers to the questionnaire, calling on individuals in the group. If they get the incorrect answer, they can always blame their small groups. This adds humor

and provides a safe way for individuals to save face if they do not have the correct answer. Presumably, the unconsciously incompetent person will have a wake up call- either because the small group convinces the person to change his answer. Or, if the unconsciously incompetent person was persuasive in his group, the fact that the reported answer is incorrect should make an impression on the person.

**In private:**

- Ask the person to serve as a co-facilitator by providing real-life examples when necessary.
- Co-opt the person- ask for his assistance.
- Discuss the true source of the individual's complaint.
- Ask if the person is willing to let the other participants learn.
- If necessary, indicate that the person is free to leave the session.

**What a Trainer Should NOT Do:**

- Argue with the person.
- Insult the person.
- Get defensive.
- Express anger.
- Let the person control the discussion.

**Commentary:** When confronted with any difficult behavior, we need to be able to step back and objectively assess what might be the root cause of the behavior. Why would someone claim competence when in fact the person was incompetent in a topic?

The fact that we refer to this person as being unconsciously incompetent says it all. This person does NOT know he doesn't know! Often, this person is a leader, either by virtue of position or seniority. The person may either be too far removed from daily operations to stay in touch with procedural changes, or may be kept so busy with other duties that he is unable to attend informational sessions that would update his knowledge on the topic. In some instances, management may simply assume that this person does not need to attend those informational sessions, because they think the person is already aware of procedural changes.

The important thing is to ensure buy in from the person that competence on the issue is important, and then to provide a safe way (generally in a group discussion setting) for the person to realize what he does not actually know. No one CHOOSES to be unconsciously incompetent.

## **7. The Distracter.**

The Distracter asks questions or raises issues that are not related to the topic which is being discussed. She talks on the side about unrelated things while the group is trying to work. The Distracter jumps into the discussion without raising a hand or using other courtesies for obtaining permission to speak.

### **What a Trainer Can Do:**

#### **In front of the group:**

- Conduct a large group discussion to create ground rules for basic classroom courtesies.
- Use a Koosh ball to recognize speakers. In this way, only the person with the Koosh has permission to speak.
- Post a process map of the agenda on the wall as a continual visual reminder of the topics to be covered.
- Provide Post-Its on the participant tables and encourage participants to post their questions on a flip chart "parking lot."
- Clearly introduce each topic and close the discussion on each topic.
- Quietly monitor small group activities so that you can intervene where necessary.
- Move close to the distracter who is speaking while others are working, to use physical proximity to prompt her to stop talking.
- Make an assignment that will distract the distracter and ultimately provide the attention she is seeking in a more controlled and acceptable fashion.
- Briefly acknowledge the distracter and indicate who actually has the floor to speak.
- Say "Thank you, but let's see what others have to say, now."
- Stand beside her.
- Put her in charge of an activity.
- Try comments such as, "Interesting, but could you hold it until later?"
- "I'd like to discuss that, but we really have to get back to our topic."
- If the distracter is conducting a side conversation while someone else has been recognized to speak, make a general statement: "Could I ask everyone to give their attention to [the speaker]? Thank you." or "I'm not sure that everyone can hear what [the speaker] is saying."
- If you are able to create a friendly relationship with the distracter, use gentle humor to rein the person in.

#### **In private:**

- Thank the person for his/her energy and involvement- then explain your time or agenda constraints.
- Co-opt the person- ask for her assistance.

**What a Trainer Should NOT Do:**

- Get distracted from the agenda or the topic at hand.
- Lose patience or focus.
- Get angry at the behavior.
- Let the person control the discussion.
- Let the person break the group's classroom rules.
- Allow the person to treat other participants in a disrespectful fashion.

**Commentary:** When confronted with any difficult behavior, we need to be able to step back and objectively assess what might be the root cause of the behavior. Why would someone choose distracting behavior?

Some people really enjoy chatting and tend to think with their mouths. They get so focused on their thoughts and expression of those thoughts that they are unaware of others around them.

Sometimes, they are very philosophical and simply miles ahead of the rest of us. As a result, although there is a logical connection to the topic from their perspective, their comment sounds off-base to everyone else.

Their enthusiasm for the topic may cause them to speak out without waiting to be acknowledged. Although their behavior may be distracting to the trainer, their interest and their comments may be on target.

In all of these instances, their behavior is not intended to be disruptive, even if the trainer may tire of trying to rein them in. Patience and firm but respectful facilitation are both key to handling the distracter.

**8. The Rambler**

The Rambler has difficulty making simple, concise statements. He makes grandiose theories or complicates simple ideas with tangential ideas. The Rambler often confuses most or all of the rest of the group with his statements.

**What a Trainer Can Do:****In front of the group:**

- Summarize and recap the content points that were covered prior to the person's statement.
- Try to distill the key points from the person's statement.
- When this individual stops for breath, express your thanks.

- Ask clarifying questions.
- Set time limits for comments (as part of the original ground rules or to ensure that the agenda can be covered).
- Diplomatically interrupt to refocus the person on the content.
- When the person pauses for a breath, ask which part of the question he is discussing.
- Say “Thank you, but let’s see what others have to say, now.”
- Use gentle humor to refocus the person.
- Listen carefully to find the relevant points that are made.
- See if the person is willing to defer discussion of his question to a break, or while others are preparing for an activity.

**What a Trainer Should NOT Do:**

- Show impatience.
- Interrupt rudely.
- Refuse to acknowledge the person’s desire to speak.
- Make disparaging statements.
- Allow the person’s monologue to confuse the group.
- Engage in lengthy discussion of the tangent raised by the person.
- Label the person in front of the group or in private to other participants.
- Become busy and focus on other things rather than listening to the person.

**Commentary:** When confronted with any difficult behavior, we need to be able to step back and objectively assess what might be the root cause of the behavior. Why would someone ramble?

Some people tell stories that take a while to get to the point, while others tend to intellectualize and take the rest of us along on their stream of consciousness. In both cases, it is a matter of personality and communication style.

Sometimes the person is having trouble thinking clearly and expressing his thoughts in a clear and cohesive manner. And sometimes the person is attention-starved and finds that being long-winded helps to maintain a (captive) audience.

In all of these instances, it helps to remember that their behavior is not intended to be disruptive, even if it challenges the trainer to stay patient and on track.