

Several factors can cause tension in an orientation session. These include

- disagreements among group members or with the trainer,
- clashing personality types,
- cultural conflict,
- immature participants, and
- age differences.

How effectively the trainer deals with the tension depends, in turn, on several different factors, including the time available to address issues that arise and group support for the trainer. But the most important factor is the trainer's own skill in preventing and defusing tension and conflict.

How do experienced trainers deal with tension and conflict? Human conflict is complex, and there is rarely one sure-fire way to deal with a difficult individual, or a "type" of individual. That being said, there are many different strategies that trainers use that have proven to be effective in dealing with disruptive participants (see Resources, below, for documents that discuss many of these strategies).

First, there are some things that a trainer can do preventively, before and during a session, to lessen the likelihood of disruptive behavior.

Before the session:

- *Be prepared.* Ensure the room is set up ahead of time; have all handouts ready to go and all activities prepared.
- *Prepare for active learning.* Studies show that participants learn more when they are actively engaged in their learning (Lucas, 2005, p. 10; Mestre, 2000, p. 2; Tewksbury & Macdonald, 2005). And engaged learners are more likely to contribute productively to the session.

At the beginning of the session:

- *Set rules.* Create a set of rules, preferably (time-permitting) with the input of participants. Participants are more likely to follow rules that they themselves have helped create. As the trainer, you can make sure that the rules include those that are important to you (e.g., "Don't talk out of turn" or "Keep cell phones on silent") by asking questions with a "we" ("Should *we* include anything about interruptions?" or "How do *we* feel about cell phones?"). Once the rules have been created, post them on the wall for all to see.
- *Make a training contract.* A training contract typically outlines the roles of the trainer and the participant and is signed by both individuals. A contract is generally only done for longer trainings—those that last two or more days.

Throughout the session:

- *Treat participants as adults.* Adults come into a session with background experience and often with goals. Acknowledge their experience and goals, and draw on participant talents and levels of expertise when possible. (For more information on this topic, see the COR Center's document on adult learning and retention.)

- *Project a positive image.* Think and act positively toward participants from the first time you meet them by smiling, appearing approachable, and being open-minded.
- *Use words and phrases that build positive relationships.* Phrases such as *please, thank you, I'm sorry, I was wrong, I understand, concern* (instead of *problem*), *often* (instead of *always*), and *some* (instead of *everyone*) help to create a positive atmosphere.
- *Use appropriate and culturally sensitive terminology.* To the best of your abilities, use terms appropriately and correctly. For instance, refugees from Burma are often called Burmese, but keep in mind that there are many ethnic groups of refugees from Burma (Burman, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, and Shan, to name a few) and many different languages spoken. To learn about the languages and cultures of specific refugee groups, see the COR Center Web site.
- *Maintain good time management.* Start on time, and stick to your schedule. Stay on track in between sessions. When the morning break is over, have participants in their positions (whether it is in seats, on the floor, or standing) and begin. This helps your sessions end on time.
- *Listen openly.* As participants offer ideas, questions, suggestions or feedback, take the time to listen and think about their comments, responding appropriately and respectfully. This will also encourage participants to do the same to you and the other participants.
- *Provide ongoing feedback.* This allows participants to know the session rules and expectations so they can succeed and maximize their learning potential.

Of course, these suggestions do not always prevent undesirable participant behavior. Here are some strategies to deal with participants who are inattentive, uncooperative, or disruptive.

When you sense you are losing the attention of participants, help them listen better.

- Slow down your speech if participants are having a hard time understanding what you are saying.
- Vary your speaking style and chunk information together.
- Elicit questions and feedback.
- Control side conversations by asking that just one person speak at a time.
- Review information frequently.
- Attract participants' attention by using their names.

Quiet the conversationalists.

- When participants continuously engage in a side conversation, first use nonverbal communication (e.g., closing the distance between you and the talkers, raising your voice, making eye contact) to discourage the conversation.
- Call on one of the talkers by name and ask a specific question or for a synopsis of what was recently discussed.
- If the talkers continue, move them to different parts of the room. *If that doesn't work, take the talkers aside and discuss the issue.* Ideally, this discussion would be during a planned break, but create one if necessary.

Limit dominating participants.

- If a participant is dominating the conversation, consider setting time limits for comments (30 seconds, a minute) or diplomatically breaking in (“You raise an interesting issue. Let me stop you and get input from some others.”).
- Remain polite, summarize what the participant has said, accept that the point is valid and important, but then state, “We need to keep the group on task, so can we further discuss this during a break?”
- Use a yes-or-no question with the talker (“Do you experience this a lot?”) and then ask others for suggestions on the topic.
- When working with a co-facilitator, one of you can work with the group at large while the other takes the disruptive participant aside to discuss the situation.

Allow other participants to resolve issues.

- Be aware of the interactions between the difficult participant and the others in the group. Do others appear to support the participant? More often than not, other participants are also frustrated by the difficult participant and will take actions to quiet him or her.
- Use small-group activities with “randomly” selected leaders to quiet the louder participants.
- Pair a problematic participant with someone who can help him or her behave more appropriately.

Defuse an agitator.

- If a participant is bothering the group by loudly exhibiting his or her knowledge, ask others for their opinions on the subject.
- Break the group into pair work. Pair yourself with the difficult participant to exchange points of view, while keeping the rest of the group productive.
- If the situation becomes intolerable, split into small-group discussions or announce a break. Take the individual aside. Calmly describe the challenges you are facing as a result of his or her behavior and ask the person to leave.

Do not allow negativity to derail discussion.

- With participants who are particularly negative or resistant to ideas, listen to their rationale and try to understand their point of view.
- After a participant has been especially critical or negative, ask others in the group to give their viewpoints.
- Maintain an optimistic perspective.

References

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Additional Resources

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