

## HOW TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULT PARTICIPANTS

Working with a new group of members can be a lot of fun but as facilitators we occasionally run into some challenging classroom situations. Although we establish the group “learning atmosphere” and set other logistical guidelines for class, at times things may pop-up that need to be addressed in order to ensure a positive and inclusive learning environment. Here are some tips on how to identify and deal with some challenging situations.

### **The “Dominator”**

It’s just after lunch on day one and you’ve started to notice that whenever you pose a question to the group or there is a group discussion, one participant excitedly jumps in with a number of comments and very few others are participating. Although this person is contributing thoughtful insights and comments it appears that they are dominating the group and others are reluctant to participate or are being prevented from having their voices heard in the group.

*Why should we deal with this situation?*

In our courses we want to encourage people to learn from each other, value the perspectives of others and create a sense of inclusiveness and community. Having one person dominate discussions can make others feel that their contribution isn’t valued or welcomed.

*Some tips on how to deal with this situation:*

- Thank the person for their participation and indicate it is time to hear from others
- Politely ask the person to give someone else a chance
- Deliberately turn to others and ask for their comments, choose someone who has not yet had a chance to speak
- Interject during the person’s flow of talk with a summarizing statement
- Avoid looking at the person and call on someone else
- Initiate a private discussion - Acknowledge the person’s expertise or experience and ask permission to call on them for specific examples but that they should allow space for others to participate first

### **The “Social Butterfly” or “Smartphone Addict”**

As the course progresses you notice that some participants are chatting with their neighbours and not paying attention to the facilitators/activity or they start using their cell phone during group activities instead of actively participating in the task at hand. You also notice that some participants use class time and group work as a time to wander off to speak to local union officers or other non-participants.

*Some tips on how to deal with this situation:*

- Remind participants of the no cell phone use policy in class unless it’s an emergency
- Request that people refrain from having side conversations
- Reassign seats during a break – move name cards, do a line-up and have participants sit in their new seats – so that people can sit beside someone new
- Ask participants to limit their socializing/meetings with others to established break times

## **The “Take Us Off on a Tangent by Asking Questions About My Problems” Participants**

Often during a course, a participant will have real life union or workplace question that they ask about during a lesson. At times these questions may take on a life of their own and spur a larger discussion not related to the lesson. Then other people join in asking their own questions and next thing you know the time allotted for an activity has passed and you haven't covered all the required material!

### *Why should we deal with this situation?*

While we should encourage questions during class they should be related to the topic at hand and ideally be able to be dealt with quickly otherwise it may be difficult to cover the required material in the allotted time frame. Additionally, other participants may become frustrated or confused by going off topic by focusing on the specific questions of an individual participant.

### *Some tips on how to deal with this situation:*

- If question at hand will be covered by material later, ask the person to hold on to the question until the appropriate time
- Establish a “parking lot” for issues to be dealt with at another time
- If it is something that other participants may be able to assist with encourage the group to provide answers to the participant's questions with a specific time limit
- If it is a question unique to the participant's worksite and collective agreement, suggest they speak to their president/unit chair or Staff Rep for assistance