

## HANDLING DIFFICULT MEETING SITUATIONS

Here are some difficult situations the Chairperson may face and advice for handling them.

- ***A person who tends to dominate the discussion.*** A talkative participant must not be permitted to dominate the discussion. Use direct questions to draw out other participants. If nothing else is effective, a private chat with the individual during a coffee break may help. You might say, "I appreciate your willingness to give us your views, but I am concerned that we're not hearing from some of the other Board members. I want to try to draw them out when we reconvene."
- ***A person who wants to argue.*** Usually, such a person irritates the group and hostility may be expressed or the group may come to temporary silence. Subsequently you may want to use direct questions to other participants as a means of maintaining the balance. However, you may have to be very direct, pointing out that the quibbling is interrupting the progress of the meeting and is a waste of valuable time.
- ***A person who starts another meeting with neighbors.*** Side conversations are inevitable in a typical meeting and are apt to be brief. They become a problem only if prolonged. One technique is to invite the individual to share with everyone what is being said. Another way to handle this situation is to simply be quiet and look at the offending person.
- ***A person who is timid or lacking in self-confidence.*** Whether such a person feels uncertain because of inexperience or is simply unwilling to speak due to fear of embarrassment, ask a question in an area where the reluctant individual can speak with conviction.
- ***Establishing and holding the interest of the group.*** It is essential to activate attention in the opening statement and then motivate the group to respond. Don't let your voice sink to a monotone. Put energy into your sentiments.
- ***Starting a discussion when necessary.*** Ask questions demanding consideration of the problem from an unusual point of view. Use cases, real or hypothetical. Call for specific experiences, ideas, or opinions from group members.
- ***Keeping up with the pace of the discussion.*** Try to crystallize statements into phrases which can be recorded quickly. Ignore statements not pertinent to the topic. Pursue an important line of inquiry with direct questions.
- ***Handling touchy subjects.*** Anticipate what touchy subjects may arise and face them squarely. If they are not truly pertinent to the subject under discussion, point that out, referring to the objectives of the meeting. If they are pertinent, remain neutral, insisting on an objective consideration of the question.
- ***Developing discussion and avoiding superficiality.*** Be prepared to cite specific cases and facts for consideration if they are not forthcoming from group members. Call on individuals known to have had specific relevant experiences past or present. Do not permit oversimplification.

## HANDLING MEETING CONFLICT

Because meetings depend on interaction between people with different values, perspectives and communication styles, it is almost inevitable that conflict will occur from time to time. The impact of conflict on a group depends on what the conflict is about, how it is initiated and how it is managed.

Submerged conflict eventually surfaces. When someone raises a seemingly negative point of view, he or she at least gives others a chance to address the issue. When they can't express differences, people may enter into covert forms of conflict that aren't readily apparent. Encourage discussion. Uncontrolled conflict, however, can lead to hurt feelings, withdrawal and the destruction of the group.

- Ensure that disagreement is expressed sensitively.
- Disagree with the idea, don't criticize the individual.
- Respond to disagreement with a spirit of inquiry. Ask for clarification or examples.



- Focus on commonalities. Point out the similarities between individual perspectives. Let the group know you want to build on those.
- Separate personalities from ideas.
- Ask two people who most oppose each other to sit down together and work out a common approach
- Humor is an effective means of reducing tension.
- If the Board is deeply divided, postpone decision-making. Appoint a task-force to work on a proposal to the Board. Include all factions on the task force.