10 Characters You May Have Met in a Meeting

Attending meetings is often a dreaded part of our work day routine. It may seem like an exercise where people take minutes and spend hours. Below is a light-hearted look at the disruptive roles any of us can – and maybe have - played during meetings. Such behavior can prolong meeting time and cause the experience to be uncomfortable and unproductive.   Do you see anything of yourself in the roles described below? The strategies in the right hand column below can be effectively used to diffuse the negative effect such troublesome behavior can have on meetings.

Monopolizer

Description

Believes he or she is the sole expert on the topic or idea at hand. He behaves as if everyone is there to hear about his extensive knowledge and experience. She and only she is the person who has seen it all, done it all, and knows better than anyone else how to solve the problem. Others shy away from contributing, and may feel intimidated by the Monopolizer.

Strategy

Doing nothing to intervene can indicate that the talker's message and rude behavior are sanctioned. The facilitator or other team members should kindly interrupt the Monopolizer, summarizing or paraphrasing what has been said. Follow that by immediately asking to hear from another team member on the subject, in effect, 'giving the floor' to another person.

Tangent Talker

Description

Hijacks the topic by taking discussion to an unrelated topic or personal agenda. One minute the team is working productively through the agenda and the next you're out in left field, usually without a logical connection to how you got there. Some Tangent Talkers, like a dog with a bone, return to a favored topic or theme at every chance.

Strategy

The facilitator or someone else can remind the Tangent Talker of the place the team is on the agenda. Or, if it is a matter the team should attend to, say 'Let's put that on the Parking Lot to discuss at a better time.' Some 'serial 'Tangent Talkers may require a private conversation outside of the meeting to figure out the intense interest in their topic and how best to diffuse the off-task behavior.

Devil's Advocate

Description

There always seems to be a person in the room who delights in taking the opposite position. Whatever is being discussed, he or she seems to have a divergent view. Taking an unpopular stance, and defending it is a sport they obviously enjoy. 'Just for the sake of argument' is one of their favorite catch phrases.

Strategy

There of course is value in considering an issue from all sides, but the Devil's Advocate can become a blocker to making decisions. Honor their alternate point of view and use it as an opportunity to ensure the issue in question has been explored to its 'root cause.' At root cause facts and data can be used to debunk any alternative realities put forth and allow the team to move on.

Cynic

Description

The ultimate naysayer, the Cynic has an advanced degree in negativity. They are skilled at derailing and deflating, vehemently rejecting proposals out of hand.   'Can't be done' and 'will never happen' seems to be their mottos.

Strategy

Adopt a 'Devil's Advocate's' strategy and challenge a Cynic to suppose for a minute the idea could work, but in another way. Use a conflict resolution technique by asking the Cynic to embrace another's point of view with the same passion and argue that position's side.

Fence Sitters

Description

Known for having paralysis by analysis, Fence Sitters are unable to make decisions. They like to bring up possible results to infinity. Like to start comments with 'yes, but' and 'what if'. Absolutely stuck in neutral by ambivalence. Uncertainty stems from concern about making a wrong choice, or that their own unique point of view may offend or be in conflict with another.

Strategy

Make sure the issue or action is being considered at root cause, and not symptom level. Use baseline data to accurately and factually describe current status. Survey data can be helpful in presenting clear 'facts' for consideration. Consensus building strategies such as 'Fist to Five' allow the Fence Sitter to 'vote' their uncertainty without preventing the team from moving forward.

Pandora's Box Opener

Description

Are compelled to bring up 'hot button' issues, knowing it is likely to provoke an emotional reaction. They take joy in the ensuing frustration and resentment. Even worse, they can resort to reopening issues previously resolved or 'banned.' Once the box is opened, it is difficult to recover and move on. These issues often are not connected to the current work, but are related in other ways to people involved. Issues such as salary or promotions are favored Pandora Box Opener topics.

Strategy

A firm 'let's not go there' may be a stop-gap measure. In a private conversation outside the meeting, the facilitator can talk with the Pandora's Box Opener about their concerns, and problem solve with them how they can resolve concerns outside of the team. Their issue may be outside the purview of the current team or connected to an issue with a team member they have confronted in other environments. Conflict resolution strategies may be in order. If a resolution cannot be affected, a change in team members may be necessary.

Brown Noser

Description

Bend over backwards to ingratiate themselves with leaders and power brokers. They tend to bury their own true feelings about an issue in favor of supporting those of people in power. This creates a situation where they own unique perspective is unknown, making them an ineffective team member. The work itself is at risk of being sabotaged when power shifts or changes hands.

Strategy

Facilitator or other team members use direct questions to draw ideas and preferences from the Brown Noser first, before others have given input. Refer back to the Brown Noser's comments in subsequent discussion, raising the importance or originality or thoughtfulness of their comment to encourage them to continue thinking independently.

Attacker

Description

Is a bully in grown up clothes. The Attacker skillfully mixes put-downs with negativity. The attacker uses a confrontational style to challenge others and go against the grain. They seem oblivious to personally hurtful comments they make, because their overriding focus is on their war of words. They may think themselves to be clever or comedic. Name calling and nick-names are a favored form of communication.

Strategy

Facilitator or other team member can reorient the Attacker to be positive, to remove the sting from their words, attempt to paraphrase their message in a less adversarial way. Meet privately with the Attacker as soon after an incident as possible. Have a frank discussion with them about the negative impact of their style. Let them know it will not be tolerated in the future and they may be asked to leave the team if it continues.

Joker

Description

Is not just the good-natured person who uses occasional humor to diffuse tense situations or provide a much-needed levity break when dealing with heavy issues. There is a time and place for joking. A constant barrage of joking comments becomes disruptive and distracting. Incessant joking has the effect of diminishing other's serious suggestions. Too much humor used too often can demean other's ideas, making it difficult to focus seriously on anything.

Strategy

Facilitator or other team member can generally redirect the joker with a brief comment, eye roll or look, or returned humor. Joker's are often attention seekers, or use humor to cover up nervousness or – curiously – shyness.   Ask direct questions of the Joker to draw out their serious input. Reinforce how valuable their true ideas are, without all the humor. If the Joker is good at his/her craft, the team may agree to make time for a humor break.

Robots

Description

Are tethered to their electronic devices.   Robots are distracted by notifications on phones and laptops for email, text messages, social media accounts and are compelled to attend to them instantly. Robots are consumed with making instantaneous electronic responses, that are not connected to the work of the team or to emergency or urgent situations related to their jobs. Addicted to their technology, they may feel as if the meeting is intruding on them.

Strategy

Creating ground rules for meetings can include a rule about technology. It can be a good idea whether or not there is a Robot on your team. Technology is now pervasive of our culture.   It may be necessary for people to occasionally monitor electronic messages, for personal or work-related urgent or emergency situations. The rule can focus on an acceptable level of monitoring, that does not take attention away from the work of the team.