

Dealing with Miscreants, Snivelers, and Adversaries

By Dick Grote

I still remember vividly my very first time in front of a class. I was delivering the first day of a rigorous five-day program on rational problem solving and decision making. What made my maiden training voyage so memorable was the unforgettably obnoxious behavior of one person in the class.

I was unable to speak one declarative sentence without this guy piping up to prove me wrong. Whatever I said, he had a better way. Every tip and technique I had learned in my intensive two-week, train-the-trainer program was worthless in trying to deal with this creep. Worst of all, in the back of the room silently sat Lorne, the program vendor's master instructor. He was there to determine whether I would be certified to teach the program.

As soon as the session ended, Lorne yanked me into an empty office, slammed the door, and howled at me, "What is the matter with you? Can't you see the reactions of the other participants . . . how angry they are with this guy? Every one of them wants to rip him apart! Why are you trying to handle him all by yourself?"

Lorne taught me the first of several valuable strategies when faced with a disruptive participant: Enlist the other trainees. You also need to make your expectations about behavior clear, encourage healthy skepticism, and know when to bring in the heavy ammo.

The next morning, I walked confidently into the classroom, began my presentation, and waited for Mr. Odious to open his mouth. He promptly did. Instantly, I turned to a participant across the way and blandly asked, "What do you think of George's contribution, Harry?"

I was home free. Before Harry could finish, two other participants were jumping in, eager to put George in his place. When George's next comment generated another cascade of collegial denunciation, he retreated in defeat. From then on, he paid quiet attention and may even have learned more than he expected about how some people solve problems.

That first training session taught me a useful lesson about dealing with people whose goal is more to irritate than to learn: The other participants are almost always on your side. They typically find disruptive behavior just as maddening as you do, but they lack the authority to confront an obnoxious participant directly, especially a colleague. So as soon as a trainee crosses the line between honest intellectual challenge and rude provocation, turn to the other trainees for support. You'll find them solidly in your corner.

I was reminded of Lorne's wise advice about how to neutralize Mr. Odious and all of his surly cousins during a recent series of train-the-trainer programs I conducted for a large federal intelligence agency. The trainers were learning how to conduct a one-day program to introduce the agency's new performance management system. They all had the normal worries about learning the formal mechanics of the system and the techniques for presenting it.

They were also anxious about handling the hostility they anticipated in their role as messengers; the agency was instituting a new program that would hold employees accountable for their performance and insist that it be regularly and honestly assessed. The trainers were prepared for tough questions and skeptical arguments. But they were apprehensive about how to deal confidently and professionally with the possibility of rudeness, refusal to participate, immature deportment, and flatly unacceptable classroom behaviors.

The techniques that worked for them can be useful to any trainer—neophyte or expert—when people act in unsuitable ways. No promises or guarantees, but here are some techniques for heading off challenger disasters.

Stage setting and skepticism

The first step—a crucial one in preventing potential troublemakers from even beginning to disrupt—is to make your expectations about appropriate classroom behavior clear from the start. Sometimes, people behave inappropri-

ately in a training session simply because they have no experience in playing the role of participant. Help them and yourself by giving them a job description. A flipchart or overhead transparency titled "How To Get the Most Out of Today's Session" can communicate expected group norms and appropriate behaviors, without suggesting that you are treating participants like children. If time allows, a short team exercise in which participants identify the characteristics of a successful workshop participant can also help establish group norms and the basic mechanics of working in team settings during training.

Another stage-setting procedure when you're introducing policies that may be unpopular is to make clear in the beginning that the course content is not a suggestion. It is, in fact, a decision on the organization's part that has been considered, discussed, and settled. Make it clear that the purpose of the session is to help people in the company learn how to use a new tool; it is not to debate whether this tool should be adopted. Allow people to be skeptical about whether the tool will work, but explain firmly that the time for debating its use has passed.

One veteran trainer has a terrific metaphor he uses to explain the appropriateness of skepticism. "We all come to training programs carrying two suitcases," he says to every new group. "One of them is labeled *Skeptic*; the other is labeled *Cynic*."

"I'd like each of you to leave the suitcase labeled *Cynic* outside the door, but feel free to bring in the one labeled *Skeptic*. Put it right up on the table next to you; rummage in it anytime you want throughout the day. And when you leave here tonight after the session, you can pick up your *Cynic* suitcase, if you still want it. Otherwise, just leave it there and we'll arrange to have it thrown out with the trash."

Maybe if we give people permission to embrace their skepticism, they can abandon their cynicism.

Dealing with genuine jerks

Explaining your expectations and setting group norms will certainly lessen the likelihood of unacceptable behaviors. But what should your response be when, regardless of stage setting, you're forced to deal with a boisterous sniveler or an obvious adversary? Here are some techniques for dealing with particularly difficult participants, starting with the mildest and moving to more direct confrontation.

Make the problem trainee the team leader. People can be disruptive in class because they crave attention, not out of malice or hostility. So, single out your "problem child" without getting personal and make him or her a team leader. For example, announce: "Your team leader for the next activity is the person wearing the most red . . . with the largest wristwatch . . . with the longest hair."

Award gold stars. I don't conduct a training program without being armed with a yellow highlighter. When a participant answers a difficult question correctly or makes a particularly insightful statement, I grab his or her name tent, whip out my marker, and draw a gold star. Silly? Of course. But all of us need stroking from time to time, and a goofy gold star can do the trick. Make a special effort to let your miscreant earn a star. It's unquestionably manipulative but incredibly effective.

Communicate without words. There are many nonverbal signals we can use to communicate to a participant that his or her behavior is unacceptable. One is to ignore the person. Just pay no attention whatsoever, and make it obvious that you are consciously ignoring the obnoxious "contributions."

Another nonverbal technique used by some trainers is the glare or dirty look, but rarely (as most parents have painfully discovered) does that work. Usually, it generates more misbehavior. Instead, look directly at the person, slowly shake your head back and forth, and let the befuddled expression on your face convey your bewilderment: "Are you really uttering those incredibly witless statements?" Your expression should not be angry or hostile, but amazed and forgiving.

Force specifics. This is a useful and professionally dignified approach when an individual is making sweeping statements such as, "This will never work!

This system is nonsense! This is all just a pile of hooley!" Asking a direct question can help turn general condemnations and angry indictments into rational expressions of genuine concern. For example, ask, "What in particular do you feel will not work well, Sally?" Or, "Just which part of the approach do you feel is hooley, Louis?"

Thanks for sharing. There's no law that requires you to respond to every statement a participant makes. You can simply acknowledge it by saying, "Thank you for sharing that." Then continue with your agenda.

Have a private conversation. This is the most serious step, before you decide that the session cannot continue. Call a break and privately say, "Paul, I need to talk with you for a moment." When the room has cleared and it's just you and Paul, say these exact words: "Paul. (pause) Is it personal?"

This direct and unexpected question tends to catch the person off-guard and generate an immediate denial of any personal animus. Next, say that the person's behavior is unacceptable. If it continues, you will either call his or her boss or the program administrator to have the recalcitrant trainee removed from the room or you will cancel the program entirely. End the conversation by making sure the person knows that the outcome will be entirely his or her choice.

Frankly, I believe that sometimes we trainers allow ourselves to take too much rudeness from participants—either because we see ourselves as caring professionals or because we feel that we ought to have sufficient skills to be able to handle anything that comes up.

Don't feel that you have to put up with an abusive, disparaging, or contemptuous participant. You have the right to require every person in the room to behave like a mature and responsible adult. If after subtle or direct chiding, someone still chooses to behave inappropriately, I urge you to say, "Your behavior is unacceptable. If you are unable to act reasonably, I will stop teaching this workshop and leave. The participants will then be scheduled for another class without you."

And if the behavior continues, walk.

Fortunately, situations this serious happen rarely. More likely, you will have a positive resolution, such as my early experience with George, and your

class clown will be converted into an interested, involved learner.

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