

Facilitating Challenging Behaviour



At some point every group encounters people who are behaving in a way that the rest of the group find challenging. It can cause strong reactions and throw the group off course. As facilitators or group members, we might react by trying to shut down the behaviour as quickly as possible, or we might ignore it, hoping it goes away. These reactions rarely resolve the issues and the behaviour may continue, or others may act in ways that could also be considered by the group to be disruptive.

Dealing with difficult behaviour doesn't have to be stressful. With a little bit of understanding of what's going on in the group or for the individuals and then using a few simple tools, issues can be successfully resolved.

A lot of what's written about difficult behaviour creates stereotypes of 'difficult people' and suggests set-piece responses. At Rhizome we advocate a more sophisticated approach to bring you better results.

Here's a step by step guide:

Step One: Ask yourself 'Why?'

Pause and resist the urge to blame the person whose behaviour is considered to be 'difficult' in the current situation. Think about the context and where the group is in its cycle of the group's development – what would be the likely behaviour of the group and its members at this point? Is this behaviour in keeping with this stage of development? For example, difficult behaviour may be a symptom

of a weakness in the group; it may have weak boundaries or a lack of understanding or agreement on how it operates.

And remember it's the behaviour that's difficult and not them as a person; something is making them behave the way they are. As a facilitator it's your role to try and understand what that is. Look around you – what can the body language of the group tell you? Listen to the person's tone of voice; what does that tell you? What is being said and what might lie underneath what is being said? Are there issues about diversity in the group, and is the person reacting to this? Could some people feel marginalised in the group, or might they be bringing issues in from their wider lives? Things like this will help you diagnose the cause of the situation. Reflect on the possibility that it may be a need they have brought to the meeting or workshop that isn't being met, it may be something about the way the group is treating them, or the way that you're facilitating the session that's sparked their behaviour.

Step Two: Take action

Once you have a better understanding of what might be causing the behaviour, you can act appropriately. By naming the elephant in the room, as best you can, you acknowledge that there's an issue that may be affecting how people are interacting with each other and this may defuse tensions. You might choose to address the issue directly with the group; sometimes articulating an issue as you perceive it allows others to contribute

what they think is going on. They may not agree with your interpretation, but talking about it allows the group to go on and address the issues. At other times making use of an appropriate facilitation tool can change the way an individual is perceived or the patterns of the group's behaviour; this can allow the issues to be discussed and deepen the level of understanding. In any case, reviewing and restating the boundaries in the group agreement (see box opposite) can be helpful.

Step Three: Problem solved!

You've started to meet your 'difficult' person's needs, so naturally their difficult behaviour will subside. As easy as 1,2,3. Well maybe not, but it's not as stressful as you might initially have thought. Usually difficult behaviour is caused by a lack of listening in a group; if we don't give people clear signs that they are being heard they understandably may start to feel alienated. Plan your sessions to maximise listening using tools such as working in pairs, small discussion groups, and go-rounds.

In summary

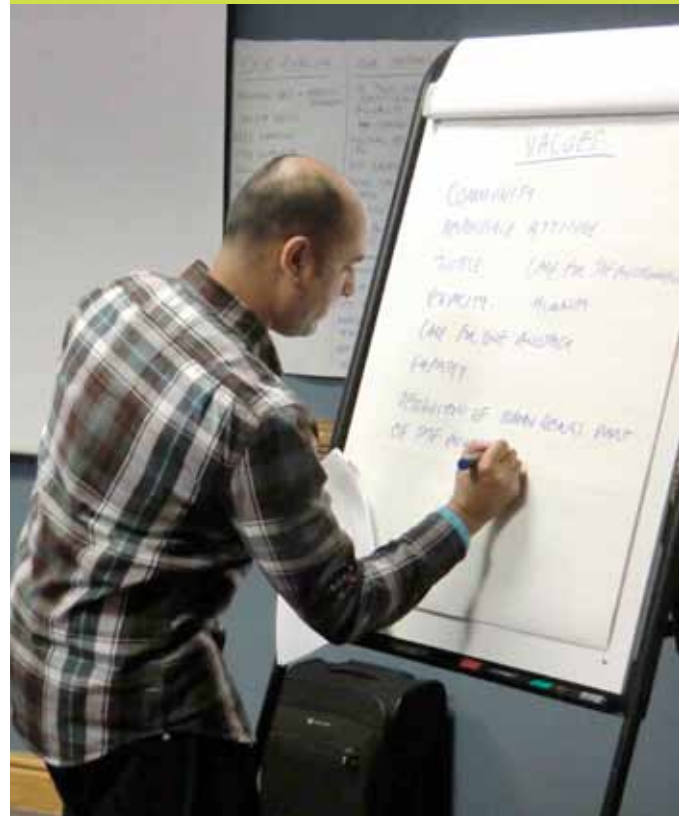
- Look and listen for the underlying cause. What needs aren't being met?
- Use an appropriate facilitation tool.
- Problem solved!

An example

Lola comes to the meeting full of enthusiasm and good ideas. She struggles to get her ideas heard because the others in the meeting are more confident speakers. When she finally gets a chance to speak, she feels that her idea is dismissed without any consideration. So, naturally she's upset – she doesn't bother making any more useful contributions. Instead she makes sarcastic remarks from the sidelines... can you blame her?

The solution might be as simple as saying "Lola, I noticed that you were trying to share some of your ideas earlier. I'm not sure that we heard them very well – sorry about that. Would you mind explaining them again?"... or, if you don't want to put Lola on the spot, you could rephrase it - "OK, we've had lots of great ideas. Let's write them all up on flipchart paper so none of them get lost. Let's have a go-round – each of you add one idea that you'd like to be considered"... "have we missed any, anyone? ...yes, Lola..."

Group Agreements



It usually helps a discussion if, at the beginning, the participants agree a set of guidelines on how they will behave. Here are our best 4 pieces of advice:

1. Explain why group agreements are useful before asking the group to create one.
2. Desirable behaviours should be specific enough that the group can check if they are being followed. "Active listening", for example, is too broad. Break it down. One example of a specific behaviour is "Don't talk while others are speaking".
3. Make sure that guidelines work for everyone. Take "Don't talk while others are speaking". It might be very hard for some people to remember everything said by someone who goes on and on. Interrupting them may be the best way to see that everything they say gets understood and discussed.
4. Make sure that everyone in the group signs up to the guidelines – and agrees to support the facilitator in seeing that they are observed.