

Navigating Participation Challenges



Helping people participate fully, and bringing their collective perspective to the discussion.

Common participation challenges

- Meeting lacks focus
- Disruption via absenteeism (arriving late, leaving early or multitasking)
- Side conversations
- Going off topic
- Dominating the discussion
- Attachment to 1 particular topic or personal agendas
- Negativity, hostility
- Rambling
- Interruptions

Considerations

- What's behind the participation challenge?
- Consider underlying drivers (e.g. group dynamics, session design, potential equity gaps).
- How is the behaviour affecting the group or people's ability to achieve their outcomes?
- How do you address the situation in a way that's respectful and compassionate?

Overcoming participation challenges

- Set/clarify expectations, objectives and needs in advance of the meeting and again once it starts.
- Establish rules of engagement/ground rules and refer back to them when the group needs to refocus.
- Guide or steer the group's attention back to the discussion to shut down side conversations or unrelated tangents.
- Set limits with regards to time allotted to each speaker and encourage participation from everyone who wants to share to diversify the discussion and deal with dominant personalities.
- Summarize and restate points to deal with rambling or interrupting participants.
- Use active listening techniques to bring attention to a challenge in a compassionate way.
- Speak to an individual privately to address persistent issues.



Activity 1

Choose a meeting or a day with a few meetings. While you're attending, take note of participation challenges you either observe or experience. After the meeting, reflect on what kind of impact they had on people's participation. Consider brainstorming 2 or 3 strategies to try if you find yourself in that situation again.

Activity 2

1. Think about a participation challenge you have experienced. (1 min)
2. Pair up and brainstorm possible strategies to respond. (5 min)
3. If the group is larger, ask pairs to join up to make groups of 4 and continue the brainstorm. (5 min)
4. Record the data on a whiteboard. (15 min)
5. Ask 3 people to share their observations.

Final bullets

- Most participation challenges can be addressed by considering someone's intent separately from the impact they may be having.
- By being intentional about how we respectfully acknowledge and address participation challenges, we can encourage full participation and increase mutual understanding, thus leading to solutions that last.

