

Manage difficult students

Even the most experienced trainers encounter situations in which the group process is affected due to the behavior of one or more of the group members. When this occurs, it is necessary for the trainer to take action or there will be a negative affect on the group. There is no one perfect solution for each situation. Below are examples of strategies to manage difficult students.

What to do if...

A student answers a question incorrectly

- Ask the group, "That's one way to look at it, would others in the group like to express their opinions?"

One person is monopolizing the group:

- When the trainee stops for breath, thank her, refocus her attention by restating the relevant points and then move on by starting another discussion or asking, "Are there any other questions?"
- Set expectations at the beginning; let the group know that you encourage everyone participate

One person looks interested but never talks

- Divide the group into smaller groups for discussion
- Find out about her or his experience and ask, "What has your experience been in this area?"
- Give everyone a chance to write down their responses to an answer and then go around the room and have everyone provide one answer at a time
- Respect her/his wishes not to talk (it does not mean that learning is not happening)

A couple of people continue to carry on private conversations, arguing points with the person next to them

- Stop everything and silently wait for the group to come back together
- Remind everyone that you will not be able to complete the work efficiently unless only one group member is heard from at a time
- Rearrange chairs at the break

A group of people are antagonistic towards each other and it is causing discomfort to the group

- Establish some group rules for the disagreement, ask others to serve as observers and encourage them to air the issues so others can be involved
- Note that "It seems you two disagree on this issue, how do others of you feel about this topic?"

- Thank the persons by saying, “You have highlighted this issue for us. Break into small groups and discuss it.”

One person is openly hostile, criticizes and blames others, interrupts

- Paraphrase the issue that the person says to make sure you understand
- If criticized, say “That’s an interesting opinion, what do you rest of you think?”
- Do not get in a long discussion with the person, ask to speak with him later so you do not take time away from the rest of the trainees
- Agree with the parts of her comments that are true and disagree with the rest by providing simple, clear facts

One person or several persons are bored and indifferent

- Take a break, suggest fresh air
- Check temperature in the room & adjust if necessary.
- Do stretching exercises with the group
- Use non-threatening activities to help people begin talking again
- Acknowledge that you may not be meeting the group’s needs; break the group into small groups and ask them to come up with some ideas to address the topic for the remaining class time

Key Points

- If problem behaviors occur that are disrupting the class from learning, assess the problem and consider your possible responses
- Remain calm no matter what happens and do not lose your temper
- When handling a problem behavior, maintain the self-esteem of the person or persons involved
- Remember, you cannot change people. Some people may appear bored or non-participative because there are other issues in their lives. If the behavior is not disrupting the group, one option is to ignore them.