

Top Tips – Dealing with Difficult Delegates

Supplied by: The Development Company Limited

A trainer is expected to lead the group, facilitate learning – and manage difficult delegates. Basic theories of assertiveness will help any trainer to deal with difficult situations effectively; the more assertively you behave, the fewer opportunities for disruption present themselves. However, it does happen to the best trainer.

Here are a few ideas for dealing with difficult situations:

1. Never humiliate a person – most of the other delegates will feel some sympathy for the challenging delegate, and you may find yourself alienated from the group.
2. Avoid the temptation to get into an argument during a training session – although it may entertain others in the short term, you run the risk of losing the argument, and, losing your credibility. Should the argument go on, other delegates may start to become bored and irritated.
3. Do not ignore the person, or people – they will not go away.
4. Never lose your cool – if you feel that you are going to lose your temper, count to ten, calm down, and take a break as soon as it is appropriate to do so.
5. If you believe that the difficult person is going to reduce other delegates' opportunities to learn, consider asking them to return to work – your remit to ask this should be discussed with managers or clients prior to a course.
6. Wherever possible, talk to the difficult person on a one to one level. Find them at lunchtime or coffee break and ask them what the problem is. Even the most upset person will usually talk reasonably given the opportunity for a private chat.
7. Remember that people learn and process information at different rates – sometimes we may think that someone is being deliberately obtuse or pedantic just to be difficult, when in fact they are just having to work hard to understand.
8. People have a right to their opinions – if you ask for feedback on how the course is going, and a delegate is destructively critical, accept their right to do so. Turn it into a conversation rather than an argument. “What specifically am I doing that you disagree with?”, or, “I’m interested to know why you are not getting anything from the course. Can you explain on that for me?”, or, “What needs to happen for this course to meet your particular needs?”.
9. Becoming defensive usually gives the difficult person the opportunity they are looking for: the attack/defend cycle. Instead, thank them for their honesty, and ask them for ideas to improve their experience.

It is always possible to make some kind of connection with each person. You need to use all the flexibility, adaptability, and patience that you can.

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