

Dealing with Dysfunctional Behavior

By Marilyn Hunter – Hunter Consulting

Definition of Dysfunctional Behavior:

Dysfunctional behavior is any activity by a participant that is consciously or unconsciously a substitution for expressing displeasure with the session content or purpose, the facilitation process, or outside factors. Dysfunctional behavior is a symptom, not a root cause. - Michael Wilkinson

Ground Rules or Meeting Norms:

When in a F2F meeting especially meetings that last more than 2 hours or where you will be meeting on a regular basis like a project or task force, I find one of the best ways to deal with dysfunctional behavior in meetings is to start by setting some ground rules or meeting norms at the beginning of the meeting for people to follow so that the participants know you will be using these throughout the project or task force meetings. A kick off meeting is a great place to establish these rules.

Sample of Ground Rules or Meeting Norms:

- Everyone is encouraged to speak
- One conversation at a time – respect the speaker
- Start and end on time (including breaks)
- Use the parking lot for off topic ideas and concerns
- Stay engaged - eManners (phones, emails, texts)
- ELMO (Enough, Let's Move on!)
- Take a stand
- Others?

Low Impact Dysfunction/ Disruption

- Most dysfunctional behavior has a disruption factor on your meetings.
- Looking at ways to minimize the disruption is key to keeping your meeting on track.
- Here are a few dysfunctional behaviors that typically have low impact on a meeting.
 - People arriving late at the start of the meeting or coming back from breaks.
 - When taking a break, indicate what time you'll be starting up again instead of saying we'll take a 10-minute break. I like to use a clock in the room, and say we will start back up at 10:15 on this clock. If people are late returning back from a break late, don't wait for them, continue on, as you want to be respectful to those that did return on time.
 - Those that check out early; silence, or people who just aren't participating;
 - The physical folded arms, or facing door or window is a way of "checking out".
 - Each of these might have minor impact, but if not curtailed at this level, they could accelerate the disruption. Keep in mind that the dysfunctional behavior is not the root cause, sometimes it's good to check in with people.
 - If someone isn't participating, you can ask a question and direct to someone else, then ask the non-participating person(s) their thoughts.
- if you see people with their arms folded (especially women), they might be cold. You might ask the group if the temperature in the room is comfortable. If the temperature is fine, you might want to check in with them at a break.

More Accelerated Dysfunction/ Disruption

- Some of the dysfunctional behavior that can add more of a disruption to your meeting are: **side conversations**. I personally have difficulty filtering noise, so I always share that defect and ask that we have one conversation at a time. When I see another conversation going on, I typically wait for the person talking to finish then ask those that were having the side conversation, "is there something you want to share with the group, or was there something said that you were unclear about?" Sometimes there are issues that need to be put on the table and discussed, but if it was just a side conversation, many times that will help to curtail it.

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- **Armchair quarterback** – this is a person who offers advice or an opinion on something in which they have no expertise or involvement. Many times, they put down any suggestions from those that have the expertise or involvement, because they have an opinion and want to be heard. This is one, that when ideas are being put down, you might ask, “In your experience in this type of situation, how did you handle it successfully?” or “Can you explain specifically what was your experience with this type of situation?”
- **Doing work other than the meeting** – this is one, you typically don’t know what the root cause is, so I will typically wait for a break and address individually. You may want to empathize by saying something like “It looks like you are very busy with some work other than this session, is there a deadline you are trying to make, or is the session just not keeping you interested? If it’s a deadline, you might suggest “is this something you need to step out for and finish up quickly so you can return to participating?”. Get agreement on the solution. If it’s not interested in the session, ask what would interest them.

High Dysfunction/ Disruption:

- Negative comments about a participant
 - Respect for all participants
- Verbal attack directed at a participant or facilitator
 - Fine to disagree with the topic or idea, but it’s not Ok to verbally attack or make negative comments about the person
 - If you were in my shoes, how would you handle this situation?
- Hopefully as leaders, if you addressed the dysfunction as it starts so it doesn’t get to the high dysfunctional behavior listed here and disruption with your meeting. But when someone starts with negative comment about a participant (instead of the topic), or verbally attacks a participant or facilitator, you may need to ask for another ground rule: Respect for all participants.
- I consider this high dysfunctional behavior and disruption to any meeting. You can remind the person that it is perfectly fine to disagree with the topic or ideas of the person, but it’s not OK in a meeting to verbally attack or make negative comments to or about a person to others around them. If this is too disruptive for the person, take a break, and ask the person individually “If you were in my shoes, how would you handle this situation that has just happened?” See what they think. They may provide the background for you.
- They may offer to leave the meeting. In these situations, it typically turns out to be a personal issue that has nothing to do with the situation, decision, or process involving the meeting. It’s more of personal history with the person or the decision. You can’t change that right then.

Extreme Dysfunction/ Disruption

- Leaving the room in disgust
- Physically attacking someone
 - Call the sponsor
 - Ask the group for their suggestion

Here are some extreme dysfunctional behaviors which will cause extreme disruption in a meeting. When people get so frustrated and angry, that they either leave the room in disgust or actually physically attack someone is the time to STOP a meeting and take a lengthy break. This will give you the opportunity to call the sponsor and provide background and any suggestions you have for moving forward. Ask the sponsor or the group what they suggest should be done if they were in your shoes (have some options for them).

What are some effective strategies for preventing dysfunctional behavior in meetings?

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- **1st use Conscious Prevention:** If I'm leading a lengthy meeting, or one that I know may be a bit volatile, I like to establish and get agreement on some ground rules to help prevent dysfunction. Remind people of those rules if you start seeing minor dysfunctional behavior.
- **2nd is Early detection:** Be on the lookout for dysfunction in the meeting. Don't ignore it. My experience is, it will accelerate.
- **3rd is A Clean resolution:** Once detected, execute an appropriate resolution strategy. While the specific strategy depends on the dysfunction, when it occurs, the number of people involved, etc., there is a general formula:
 - Approach privately or generally (if it is a group issue - refer to the ground rules, or you may need to add a new ground rule)
 - Empathize with the symptom – not everyone is going to be happy to be in the meeting – outside work pressure and deadlines may be infringing on their time. Make them feel you value their time
 - Address the root cause. Sometimes it's good to ask if there's anything that the person is concerned about, other times when people are trying to do work, it's better to have people step out to address an outside issue so they can come back and participate,
 - Get agreement on the solution. Make sure you have an agreement of how to address so that you can get the person back engaged in a positive manner.

There are a number of other types of dysfunctional behavior and ways to deal with them, these are some of the most common that I've encountered.

REMEMBER: Dysfunctional behavior is a symptom, not a root cause. Behavior, not the person is dysfunctional