

# Managing the “Meeting from Hell!”

## Facilitation Techniques to Manage Three Common Dysfunctional Behaviors

By Dana Brownlee

Project manager Sherry Martin couldn't stop thinking about her last team meeting as she walked down the hall towards her office. Slamming her office door behind her, she felt on the verge of screaming and looked for something to punch. Her team was driving her absolutely crazy, and she channeled Scarlett O'Hara as she proclaimed, “I will never run a meeting like that again!” Her problem boiled down to three really difficult personalities on her team. These personalities were indeed a cancer metastasizing not just to the others on the team, but spreading also to its results.

Sherry needs an antidote... now!

Here's a little help for Sherry...and for you! Let's explore these three common dysfunctional personalities and how to effectively manage them. These personalities are known as: (1) “the dominator,” (2) the “multitasker,” and (3) the “rambler.”

### The Dominator

We've all experienced “the dominator” in one way or another. Some people tend to dominate discussions simply because they're excited and overzealous. These individuals can actually be assets to the team if we can find appropriate approaches to harness and manage all that positive energy. Unfortunately, most of us are more familiar with the *other* type of dominator—the overly aggressive, bullying person who tramples on others' comments and may attempt to hijack the meeting completely. Sometimes, these dominators are overly negative (“That'll never work here!”), and other times they just

won't let anyone else get a word in edgewise. In either case, dominators can certainly sour not just the effectiveness of the meeting, but also the morale of the team.

### Techniques for effectively managing the dominator:

- Thank the dominator for his or her feedback, and then ask for the input of the others. (“Steven, that's an interesting idea. Let's see if others have suggestions as well.”)
  - Reiterate the dominator's comment, write it visibly for all to see, and then ask for other ideas to complete the list. (“Steven, it sounds like you're recommending that we use these three vendors as our short list...is that correct? That's a great suggestion. Let's compile a list of several suggestions, then discuss them all. We'll list your suggestion as ‘A’ on the list. I'd like to get at least three other suggestions from the team. What do others think?”)
- Instead of having the group respond to an issue verbally, ask them to take two minutes to jot down their idea, issue, or recommendations on a sticky note instead. Then ask each person to share one of these written comments.
- Suggest the group use the round-robin technique (go around the room asking each person to share a comment), starting at the end of the table opposite from the dominator. (“This is such an important issue that I want to be sure I'm getting everyone's ideas. Let's do a quick round robin starting with Jill...”)
- Call on a few people you haven't heard from. (“Michael, what are your thoughts on this issue?”)

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- Call for a break from the meeting, and find an opportunity to solicit the dominator’s support “offline” during the break. (“Steven, you’ve brought up several key points. I’m hoping to get some of the other team members involved in the discussion to hear their ideas as well. Some members of the group are not as assertive, but I want to be sure we hear from them.”)
- Break the group into pairs or triads and let them discuss an issue in those smaller groups before initiating a large group discussion.
- Gain agreement with your team to use a physical object (e.g., a sponge football) to balance discussion. The person holding the football has the floor, and they must toss it to someone else once they’ve made their point.

- Affinity diagramming—a technique that prompts participants to write down comments on cards; then those cards are organized (usually on a wall) into similar categories
- Sub team work
- Dot voting—participants use sticky dots to vote on different options by placing a dot on their preferred option (typically written on a large index card)
  - Use a circular or U shape room setup that allows you to easily walk around (and near) “violators.”
  - Agree on a mild punishment for texting, e-mailing, etc. during the meeting. One group used what they referred to as a “PDA jar,” with violators be required to put in \$5/ violation (the money was later used for team lunches).

### The Multitasker

Increasingly, we’re seeing more and more multitaskers in our meetings. Aptly named, they’re the ones whose attention constantly darts between the meeting leader and any number of other tantalizing distractions (e.g., PDA, laptop, reading material). Indeed, the multitasker is physically present but mentally elsewhere.

#### Techniques for effectively managing the multitasker:

- Bring the issue up to the group during the first few team meetings and decide as a group how you want to handle the technology distractions. Options may include the following:
  - Using a “technology drop box” at the front of the meeting room and agreeing to drop in all phones, etc. prior to meeting start
  - Limiting meeting time to one hour to ensure that participants aren’t away from their other responsibilities and tasks for too long
  - Agreeing on a 15-minute “technology break” every hour
  - Requesting that participants bring a buddy to “cover” for them in case they have to step out for a call
- Use facilitation techniques that keep participants actively engaged
  - Round-robin
  - Active questioning

### The Rambler

The rambler can seriously derail a meeting with their circuitous, protracted, rambling commentary. Often, the rambling strays into areas bearing little resemblance to the topic at hand. This rambling may not only significantly extend the length of a meeting but also completely alter the meeting’s content—thereby minimizing the team’s efficiency and effectiveness.

#### Techniques for effectively managing the rambler:

- Have a printed agenda (on a flip chart or whiteboard) in the room. When conversation strays off topic, stand up and point to the specific agenda topic to refocus the group.
- Include set time-periods for each section of the agenda so you can more easily focus the group on the time allotted for each discussion point. Possibly ask someone on the team to provide a 5-minute warning before the scheduled end time for each section of the agenda.
- Simply raise your hand and interrupt the discussion to ask if the conversation is on-topic and is helping the group reach their goal for the meeting. (“Guys, allow me to step in for a moment to ask whether the vendor discussion is relevant for this particular section of the agenda?”)

- Introduce the “parking lot” (simply label a flip chart page or whiteboard “Parking Lot”) at the beginning of the meeting and announce that you’ll interrupt discussion to place any off- topic discussion points “on the parking lot” to help keep the group on track. (“*Jill, I realize that you feel strongly about the inventory control issue, but I’m wondering if we should try to resolve that now or could we possibly place it on the parking lot?*”) Review all “parking lot items” at the close of the meeting and assign action items for each.
- Assign someone on the team to act as the “rambler police” (use a badge if appropriate). This person is responsible for raising their hand anytime the discussion veers off topic.
- Consider using the ELMO technique. ELMO = “Everybody, Let’s Move On!” Whenever anyone in the group feels that the group is rambling too much, they’re expected to pick up the Elmo doll (in the center of the table).

Clearly, Sherry is dealing with some personalities that are difficult to contend with, but the biggest mistake she could make as a project manager is to ignore them. Too often project managers simply ignore their “problem children” and instead stick their head in the sand hoping the behavior will improve on its own. It won’t!

As project managers, we’re constantly balancing our focus between task and relationship. Indeed, it is because of our need to maintain positive team member relationships that we often avoid dealing with problem behaviors. We must realize that when we fail to promptly address counterproductive behavior in our team meetings, we not only allow the project to suffer, but also allow our image and credibility to be eroded somewhat. Indeed, if we are frustrated by dominators, multitaskers, and rambler in our team meeting, others are as well. When we don’t address the behavior, we’re simply sending a message to the rest of the team that we condone the behavior or that we’re not strong enough to address it. Neither is a healthy message to send.

The good news is that there are a variety of facilitation techniques at your disposal, and these techniques enable us to be assertive while preserving those critical relationships. Remember these key points when using the techniques:

- **Don’t forget the power of questions.** Questioning is a powerful way to deliver a difficult message.

Instead of saying, “*John, I think we need to move on—we don’t have time to continue discussing the vendor issues,*” **ask** a question: “*John, the vendor issues you raise are important points, so I want to be sure to document them. I’m also cognizant of our time constraints and wondering if this is an issue we should try to resolve in our meeting today or if we could possibly take it offline to resolve when we have more time?*”

- **Use the “progressive discipline” approach.** Although you definitely want to take action early and not make the mistake of ignoring problems, it’s also important to consider using milder techniques before using more aggressive ones. Many will respond to very mild interventions, and aggressive techniques can carry the increased risk of alienating the team member.
- **Act early!** You want to send a very clear signal to the team that you will address counterproductive behavior quickly. This is a great signal to send to the entire team early. Also, it becomes *much* more difficult to correct the behavior when it’s been left unchecked for awhile. Err on the side of being stricter early on and more lenient later (instead of the opposite approach).
- **Act on behalf of the team.** When you’re addressing an individual on the team about his or her behavior, remember that you’re stepping in on behalf of the entire team. The more you remember it’s not a situation of “you” vs. “them,” the easier the exchange will be. Feel free to reinforce this perspective with your wording. (“*Jeff, I understand that you feel strongly about the problems with the inventory control process, and I want to ensure we address that issue. You’ll recall that one of our ground rules was ‘Focus on the Solution, Not the Problem,’ so I just want to step in to be sure we respect that team ground rule. With that in mind, what would you recommend to help fix this problem?*”)

## Conclusion

Indeed, many project managers struggle with difficult meeting attendees. The good news is that these simple techniques can be used to effectively manage this behavior and enhance the project manager’s credibility with the team. As any team

leader, the project manager must constantly balance emphasis on task and relationship; likewise, the keen facilitator learns to develop a “bag of tricks” of sorts that enables him or her to use just the right technique at the right time with the right person. Sherry, the project manager at the beginning of this paper who vowed “I will never run a meeting like that again,” must not make the mistake of the weak project manager—simply sticking her head in the sand and hoping that the behavior will improve on its own. It won’t—in fact

it will likely worsen. As project manager, Sherry must step up and lead!

### **About the Author**

Dana Brownlee is president of Professionalism Matters, Inc., which owns and operates [www.meetinggenie.com](http://www.meetinggenie.com), an online resource for meeting facilitation tips and instructional DVDs (“Are You Running a Meeting...or Drowning in Chaos?” and “5 Secrets to Virtually Cut Your Meeting Time in Half!”)