

Difficult Team Members

In teams, you may run into people who are on the outer edges of the participation scale – from Dominant to Reluctant participants. The Dominating Participants are characterized by the following characteristics:

- They consume a disproportionate amount of “air-time”
- Their anecdotes are overlong and tend not to shed any light on the situation at hand
- They fill silence with talk - talk that inhibits a sense of momentum

As a result, other team members get discouraged, and start to find excuses to miss meetings.

On the other extreme are the Reluctant Participants. They try to blend into the background at a team meeting by exhibiting characteristics such as:

- Rarely speaking or volunteering any information
- When asked about their level of participation, they will reply, “I participate by listening. When I have something to add, I’ll say it”

As a result, other team members feel that the reluctant participant isn’t contributing, and will ostracize him even more. It’s also a waste of reluctant participant’s potential to contribute to the solution.

How to deal with Dominant Participants

1. Structure discussion on key issues to encourage equal participation. For example, have members write down their thoughts and share them around the table (Round Robin Brainstorming).
2. List ‘balance of participants’ as a general concern to critique during the meeting evaluation.
3. Practice gate-keeping: “We’ve heard from you on this Joe. I’d like to hear what others have to say”.
4. Get the team to agree on the need for limits and focus in discussions, and the value of balanced participation.

How to deal with Reluctant Participants

1. Structure participation in the same way as for dominating participants (e.g. Round Robin Brainstorming)
2. When possible, divide the project task into individual assignments and reports
3. As a gatekeeper: “Does anyone else have ideas about this?” (done while looking at a reluctant participant)
4. If that doesn’t work, you will need to take a more direct approach: “Sam, what is your experience in this area?”

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Quotable Quote:

I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish small tasks as if they were great and noble.

~ Helen Keller