

# Facilitating difficult participants

“Stay chilled – it’s never about you!”

Love them or hate them - they’re always there. Fortunately there’s a lot of wisdom about managing difficult people in workshops.

## Top line principles

- Let conflict come out. Unaddressed conflict can be destructive. It’s important to hear and respond to conflict, not have it simmering below the surface.
- Allow people to express emotions and get it off their chests. If necessary spend time examining the arguments to find out what the underlying issues are.
- Never takes sides in a conflict. Your job is to be a neutral, fair umpire, always.
- Elephant in the room? Be honest: name it.
- People often just need to be heard. Genuinely listen and let them see their words captured in writing (eg. “parked” on a white board).
- Often people have common values - they care about similar things - and the dispute is really about the ways to achieve them, about misunderstandings, or about a sense of disempowerment.
- Remember: The room will always back you up. In a difficult situation, you can = pause and ask them for advice on the next step.

## A box of tactics

1) Start with **planning**: Avoid large meetings: break into small groups or pairs. Use silent methods to get ideas in writing. Set time limits.



2) Let people speak fully, then check “Is this what you’re saying?” Capture their views (e.g. park them on a whiteboard). Thank them warmly: “That’s a good point!” Then shift your attention decisively to the next person.

3) Set ground rules that assert good behaviour (see next page). For example if you know ranters may be present, set ground rules for respectfulness. For example, invite everyone to be “aware of their own behaviour” and to “respect other speakers”.

4) Make people feel important. Give them a job to do (e.g. scribing). Or say “As Bruce reminded us.” or “And I’m sure Bruce would agree with me.”

5) If necessary, pause for a break (“time out”) or say “Can I talk to you after the workshop?”

6) If an area is controversial, have a respected expert present to answer questions.

## Words and methods to use

### Ranters and blamers

Some people bring their baggage



It might be hard, but always treat them with respect. There’s a reason for their emotion.

Give them time to be heard. Listen carefully. Acknowledge their frustration: “I understand – that’s terrible.”

Always be curious. Ask them: “What happened?”

If necessary, write down their problem or park it on a whiteboard.

Then switch to solutions: “What would you like to see happen?”, “What’s a practical solution?”

And see ‘unstoppable contributors’ on the next page.

**Tip:** If you know they’ll be there, talk them before the start, and let them get these matters off their chest in private.

**Tip for angry people:** Raise your voice to their volume and pitch, then bring it gradually down to normal.

**A story:** “For a really bad participant, the facilitator called a halt to the meeting, asked for a 10 minute break and privately asked the trouble maker to leave. Cooperation increased for the rest of the meeting because a clear boundary had been established.” (thanks Rob)

## Unstoppable contributors

Some people don't have an "off" button

Methods that work:

- Silent sessions (e.g. brainstorming with Post-it notes)
- Time limit ("1 minute", "3 minutes") for responses; use a timer and an alarm/bell to cut them off.
- Wait till they pause for breath, say "Thank you!" forcefully, then move decisively to the next person. Repeat if necessary.

Some words to use:

*"It sounds like a great/robust discussion. But I'm mindful of the time so let's get back on topic."*

*"Thanks for your amazing ideas. Now let's hear from others."*

*"Everyone here has given up their time and we need to give everyone a chance to be heard."*

*"Can we hold further discussion to the end?"*



## Set ground rules

If you sense a meeting may be "hot" then commence the meeting by setting ground rules to limit negative comments and personal attacks.

*"It's OK to disagree with ideas, but not with the people who express them."*

*"Let's respect each other by not interrupting."*

*"All contributions to be limited to 1 minute."*

*"If you're a person who finds it easy to speak up this is a chance to practice listening more. If you're a person who tends to be quiet, this is a chance to speak up."*

If ground rules are broken or you are personally challenged, be calm and assertive, refer back to ground rules for your authority, and if it continues ask the group for a ruling.

A fun idea: *"I'll make this gentle sound (e.g. frog croak phone sound) when we need reminding of the ground rules."*

## Contrarians

Some people just have to disagree

Thank them warmly and move on.

Find something they said that you agree with and say *"as Joe Bloggs said..."* (the difficult person feels heard and on side).

If they have raised a difficult question, open it to the room.

Acknowledge and promise to follow-up with them in the break. *"Let's take that on notice and I'll get back to you after the workshop."*

Get an expert to take them aside for a private chat so they don't derail the whole conversation.



## Non-participants

Some people are shy. And some people just never wanted to be there.

Be aware that some non-participants might be very shy, so don't target them - they'll start participating when they feel safe.

Start off in pairs, then small groups. This brings everyone into participation.

Use quiet individual time to let people answer questions in writing.

For participants who aren't shy, feel free call on them by name. *"Joe Bloggs, you've had experience of this issue, can you let me know what could work."*



These methods are collective wisdom shared by participants in Les's [Facilitation Skills workshop](#), especially seasoned facilitators at NSW Local Land Services and the Greater Sydney Commission. Thanks everybody!