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Medical Education @ Cardiff

Deal with Challenging Group Members

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Small groups provide an excellent format for interactive learning. Trainees and students can be encouraged to debate ideas and explore concepts within a safe environment. Task based, the group activities should be sufficiently wide to allow the learners to explore the issues, but focussed enough for the discussions to be orientated around a central topic. Things may go wrong in the small group due to the dynamics, it is important therefore for the facilitator to ensure that ground rules are established, the group size is appropriate and the tasks are relevant, with opportunities for everyone to participate.

Teachers are frequently being asked to teach more small groups, to lead discussions based around a patient's problem, perhaps at the bedside or in a seminar room. And whilst many teachers are highly skilled at facilitating such discussions and never experience any difficulties it is fair to say that most teachers, at some time, will come across one or two more challenging group members.

Background

So how do you deal with these challenging individuals? This review is a blend of many sources. It is intended to provide a group facilitator with a range of possible solutions to cope with these challenging individuals with the aim to help these individuals become more useful members of the group.

Challenging group members can fall into three main categories, the persistent talkers, the quiet and hesitant and those with a negative attitude. A number of different types and possible solutions can be identified within these three broad categories.

The Persistent Talker

Start subtly, become more direct if necessary!

These trainees are very enthusiastic and often know a lot, but they tend to dominate the discussion and prevent others from participating. There are several types:

The Monopolizer

This trainee often just likes the sound of his or her own voice. Limit their contributions by:

- ▶ Summarising the major points, and then directing specific questions to others
- ▶ Interjecting with a yes/no question and then requesting someone else to comment
- ▶ Providing them with a specific task, such as summarizing or keeping notes of the discussion, thus requiring them to listen to the other participants
- ▶ Splitting the group into smaller units for specific tasks thus limiting the damage.

The Rambler

This trainee never sticks to the point, diverting the discussion. Restrain by:

- ▶ Asking direct questions of others
- ▶ Being direct, break in when they pause for breath and state "that is very interesting but you see our issue is . . ."
- ▶ Indicating the pressure of time and the need to address the main issue
- ▶ Deferring to another time "could we talk about that at the break?"

The Eager-Beaver

This trainee jumps in with the answer to every question. Limit by:

- ▶ Directing questions to others
- ▶ Suggesting, “lets get several opinions”
- ▶ Acknowledging their help.

The ‘Mini’ Discussant

This trainee is always trying to confer with others sitting nearby. Control by:

- ▶ Calling by name and drawing into the discussion with a direct question
- ▶ Stopping and letting others listen until they realise their error
- ▶ Asking whether or not they have something to add to the discussion
- ▶ Briefing a colleague to sit next to them, thus saving a participant from being distracted.

The Quiet and Hesitant

Remember to be adaptable, each situation will be unique

These trainees often need a lot of support and encouragement in order to draw them into a discussion. There are different types:

The Shy and Timid

This trainee may speak quietly or simply cannot find the words to express their ideas. Help them by:

- ▶ Allowing time to gain thoughts and respond
- ▶ Asking the same question of several trainees with them included safely in the middle
- ▶ Asking ‘easy’ questions related to their experience
- ▶ Repeating or summarizing their ideas in your own words
- ▶ Valuing their contribution by asking supportive group members to consider the points
- ▶ Protecting them from mockery
- ▶ Using social occasions to boost confidence and encourage interaction
- ▶ Assigning the group to work in pairs on a specific task, so as to increase confidence.

The Reticent

This trainee often has a worthwhile contribution to make but often will not make it because they feel equivocal or indifferent about the other group participants and/or task. Try:

- ▶ Drawing them into the discussion by name
- ▶ Inviting them to comment about their own experience and any special areas of expertise
- ▶ Motivating by establishing relevance and stating clear goals
- ▶ Positively reinforcing early contributions
- ▶ Talking privately after the discussion to check out expectations and understanding.

Negative Attitude

Be careful to ensure that your intervention helps the whole groups’ learning

These trainees like to talk but have a negative attitude that can permeate the discussion. There are several kinds:

The Superior

This trainee takes the position that they know it all; therefore, so should everyone else. Help by:

- ▶ Telling the group that people learn more in a discussion where everyone shares their knowledge and experience
- ▶ Flattering a little by stating how much the others could learn from their experience
- ▶ Asking for specific examples and get the rest of the group to comment, then ask the individual to summarize the rest of the group’s points.

The Complainer

This trainee is a specialist in griping, blaming and faultfinding. Control by:

- ▶ Getting them to be specific about the problem rather than adding to a general malaise
- ▶ Using key member’s of the group as allies, ask “what do you think about John’s point?”
- ▶ Acknowledging a legitimate complaint, and get them to focus on the positive by asking how they would approach solving the problem
- ▶ Being direct, state that time is short, and it is necessary to get on with the discussion.

The Clown

This trainee ridicules the discussion by continually offering some irritating retort or joke that distracts from the discussion. Control by:

- ▶ “I guess I missed the point of your quip. Could you give it to me straight?”
- ▶ Complimenting any worthwhile, serious contribution
- ▶ Calling on them by name for some ‘serious’ contribution.

The Quarrelsome

This trainee has an aggressive, antagonistic and hostile disposition and is out to win every minor point, regardless of how offensive they might become. Control by:

- ▶ Rephrasing the point in milder, more objective terms
- ▶ Avoiding lengthy debate with “can we agree to disagree on this one?”
- ▶ Defusing the ‘heat’ by finding merit in one of the points, and then move on
- ▶ Acknowledging their strong opinion and asking for the group’s opinion
- ▶ Speaking to them privately after the discussion to see if you can get future co-operation
- ▶ As a last resort, asking them to leave the group.

Further Information

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