

Standing In the Fire

The Main Thing Is Not to Panic!

Written by Myriam Laberge, April 2009

You've been hired to facilitate a meeting involving a diverse group of people whose ideas, specialized knowledge, expertise, alignment and/or support are needed for an important outcome. Yet the diversity inherent in that cross-functional group, inter-disciplinary project team, organization-wide planning session, or multi-stakeholder meeting is a potential source of complex group dynamics.

What can you do to minimize the possibility of group dynamics disrupting productive work? And what helpful interventions can you rely on with confidence "in the moment", if you've done your level best, and SHIFT still happens?

WHEN SHIFT HAPPENS: HELPFUL "E-A-R" FRAMEWORK

Despite doing your level best at pro-actively scoping, planning, and designing to minimize potential group problems, and no matter how skilled you are, there will likely still be occasions that are simply not predictable or preventable. When individuals act out with inappropriate or unhelpful behaviours, or the group resists or reacts in some unconstructive way, *what are the most helpful things to do?* Rule #1: The thing is not to panic! Rule #2: Don't assume you know what is going on. Rule #3: Don't take it personally. Rule #4: Remember and use the E-A-R Framework, which stands for "Explain - Analyze - Resolve".

EXPLAIN: Your Neutral Observation

Actively intervene in the group process and simply state in objective terms, what you see, hear, and/or notice. Resist offering any interpretation of 'why' something is occurring, or of projecting any blame or criticism on anyone, e.g., "I'm hearing several people talking at once." (*As opposed to, "There are many side conversations going on because there is a lot of disagreement with the recommendation."*)

ANALYZE: Validate Your Analysis of the Implications for Group Effectiveness

Indicate the effect that the observed behaviour is having on you, other participants, and/or on the meeting outcomes. Base this statement on actual observations, e.g., "Jane is trying to speak on the topic, and I'm having difficulty hearing her." (*Resist ascribing motives or feelings to others, e.g., "Jane is not feeling valued or heard, because of these side conversations."*)

RESOLVE: Suggest an Appropriate Resolution

Depending on whether the group is sufficiently self-regulating, cohesive, and functional:

- *Invite* participants to offer their solutions, "What can we do to ensure everyone can speak and be heard?" This creates group ownership and creative solutions from the group about the most effective ways of addressing the dynamic.
- *Direct* participants of the process to follow, "Let's have a show of hands of who would like to speak. Jane - you go first since you had the floor." When groups are immature or dysfunctional, it is often more helpful for you as a facilitator to directly advise on the desired behaviour.

A final word - in situations where an individual is acting out in certain ways (e.g., dominating, interrupting, non-participation, etc.) look for an opportunity first to use the E-A-R framework in a private one-on-one conversation, say during a break. Individuals are often unconscious of their comportment and will respond well to a helpful neutral observation, implication, and invitation from you about how to resolve to more productive behaviour.