

LEADERSHIP

Nancy Baldwin Carter, Omaha, Nebraska, n.carter@cox.net

QUESTION: “Some people in my group seem to have very definite, strong and unwavering opinions. Their voices are always heard, because they speak up. Now, I am hesitant to open up any discussion because they dominate and others clam up. What can I do to create a better atmosphere during the meetings, so others can be heard (and want to come back to the meetings)?”

ANSWER: Item number one: Sit down with the group and talk about what everyone wants—what would their ideal group look like? Discuss it. Do they want a non-threatening atmosphere where members feel free to say what they think? A safe place where people are not judged or criticized? A friendly place where they know members will keep each other’s confidences and will not gossip about each other behind their backs? Talk about it. What kind of leadership do they hope for? What bothers them about the meetings now? What would it take for their group to be the way they want it to be? Keep talking until consensus is reached.

OK, OK, I know—everyone’s already tried this one. It was a horror. Things got out of hand. Members refused to stick with the issues. People got personal. And loud. This can be frightening—a real turn off. OR nobody would talk. Members were gazing out the window, filing their nails, yawning, rolling their eyes. It’s not easy to get a group to be this honest, this introspective, this engaged.

But this step is so important it’s worth another try. Do something different this time. Set ground rules and insist they’re followed. Bring a timer with a musical sound to cut off long-winded speakers—or maybe a cute little rubber ducky to quack when their time is up. Present the agenda in a different way. Start with an easy question. Maybe draw questions out of a hat. Entice everyone to speak. (“On a five-point scale, where do you stand on the notion that we should have fewer medical speakers this year?”) Have fun. Provide something devastatingly yummy to snack on. Remind members you’re all there to help make this a better group because of their input. Who knows? It could work the second time around (or third, or fourth!)

LEADERS

Here’s a thought: leaders lead. They guide. They facilitate. They encourage. They inspire groups to set the standard, and then they help them stay on track. They set the tone, exhibiting enthusiasm and positive, happy expectations. They are models of agreement, trying to get everyone in on the act. They allow, indeed even expect, members to have their say. They trot out a hearty sense of humor. They keep their mouths shut a lot and try to remain neutral. They listen carefully. They set a positive example for those in their groups.

And when it’s time for them to step in, they do. Groups want leaders. Good leadership creates an aura of fairness, so that even the least likely member to speak up feels protected enough to participate. Leaders help engender the courage it takes for members to talk about the tough stuff. They learn how to keep discussions moving without seeming to intrude.

continued

What leaders don't do is insist their way is always right. They don't give personal advice or tell others what they have to think or do. They don't express their own strong opinions or try to humiliate those who don't agree with them. They don't get their noses bent out of shape by taking things personally. They don't throw cold water on other people's ideas, dash creativity, or squelch passion. They don't impose their own rigid standards upon the groups.

Upshot: Leaders don't own the groups they lead.

DYNAMICS

Now, about those pesky members with opinions: Hurrah! Blessed be the groups whose members are thinking! But they're dominating the conversation, you say? Well, that's where leaders step in. Members can't be allowed to speak endlessly or to be attack dogs, so forceful that others become intimidated. Leaders must confidently express the power they've been given to enforce time limits and keep order so everyone feels free to participate. The answer isn't to muzzle those who attempt to drown out others; the answer is to make them feel more a part of the group.

At the same time, open-minded leaders are not frightened by new thoughts. They understand it's all right for members to express a minority view. This isn't *controversy*—it's merely someone airing an opposing opinion. They rejoice when members think outside the box—they're not threatened by ideas that are different from their own.

MEMBERS

Members can do their best by assisting with meeting activities. They can get on committees that choose topics for discussion, mindful of the difference between having discussions that stimulate thinking rather than those that are merely fact based or chatter.

They can respect each other's right to speak, realizing that others are there to participate, not to have someone tell them what to do. They can listen well and talk about their own experiences, rather than only making comments about what others say. Will small groups work better? Then divide up and sit in small circles. Want ways to bring everyone into the picture? Let all members decide the structure for this path.

No meeting will please everyone. But groups that are working on producing the kinds of meetings members want to come back to will have the most success. Good enough reason to try, isn't it? In fact, the most beneficial help would probably come from others of us who have been through this situation—there's power in numbers! *How about letting PHI hear from you? What was your solution? What worked? What didn't? We can learn a lot from each other, don't you think?*
