



## Facilitation Tips for Managing Difficult Personalities

Some small group sessions are more difficult than others are. A contributing factor can be individual personalities that hinder effective group discussion. Three of these difficult personalities include: the Dominator, the Multitasker, and the Rambler.

The following outlines some suggestions in managing these sometimes difficult personalities.

### The Dominator

A “dominator” is someone who tends to dominate the discussion. They might be excited about the topic, even over-zealous. Or they might feel they have a lot to contribute to the conversation.

While such individuals can be an asset to a group, when they use their energy to get a discussion started, they can also be overly aggressive and hijack the session. They can also come across as bullying by trampling on the comments and contributions of others. Sometimes, dominators can be very negative. Other times they just won't let anyone else get a word in edgewise.

For all of these reasons, dominators can reduce the effectiveness of a small group, removing the joy of participating and even the willingness to attend.

### Here are 8 techniques to effectively manage a Dominator:

1. Thank the dominator for their feedback and ask for others to contribute.  
Ex: *“Thanks for sharing, Melissa. Let’s hear what some of the others think.”*
2. Restate the dominator’s comment, and then ask for other ideas to enhance or build on it.  
Ex: *“Tom, it sounds like you feel the Lord is not always with us. What do others feel we can do when we sense we are alone?”*
3. Use the round robin technique, and go around the room asking each person to share a response to a question. Note: start with the person furthest away from the dominator.  
Ex: *“This is such an important topic that it would be great to hear everyone’s responses. Let’s do a quick round robin starting with Jill...”*
4. Specifically call on a few people who haven’t said much yet.  
Ex: *“Michael, what are your thoughts on this topic?”*
5. Take a break and solicit the dominator’s support offline.  
Ex: *“Sam, you’ve brought up several key points. I’m hoping to get some of the others involved in the discussion to hear their responses as well. Some here are not as assertive, and I want to be sure we hear from them. Will you support me in this?”*
6. Take two-minutes and ask everyone to *write down* a brief response to one of the questions (hand out blank paper and pens, if needed). Then ask each person to share their response.



7. Break the group into pairs or triads and let them discuss a question or topic in smaller groups before initiating a large group discussion.
8. Gain agreement with the group to use a physical object (e.g. a spoon) to balance discussion. The person holding the object (spoon) has the floor, and they must hand it to someone else once they make their point.

Note: the objective of all of these techniques is to find ways to engage others.

### **The Multitasker**

Increasingly, there are more and more multitaskers in small group sessions. Aptly named, these are individuals whose attention constantly darts between whoever is speaking and any number of other distractions, such as serving food, cleaning up, checking their smartphone, reading materials, etc.). Indeed, the multitasker is physically present but mentally elsewhere.

### **Here are 3 techniques for effectively managing a Multitasker:**

1. At the beginning of a session, discuss the issue and decide as a group how you want to handle the various distractions. Options may include the following:
  - a. Agree to delay the official start until all other activities have ceased. Suggest food be served before the discussion starts or after the small group session has been officially closed in prayer.
  - b. Agree on and hold to a defined time frame, including both start and stop times. Limit sessions to maximum 60 to 90 minutes, whatever works best for the whole group.
  - c. To help manage distraction of smartphones, use a “technology drop box” (or bin or bag) for all participants to drop their devices in at the start of the session. Everyone gets their device back after the closing prayer.
2. Use facilitation techniques that keep participants actively engaged, such as:
  - a. Round robin. Engage everyone by asking each person to respond to each question.
  - b. Active questioning. Specifically call on individuals to share their thoughts.
  - c. Sub-team work. Break into pairs or triads to discuss a question before initiating a large group discussion.
3. Get the multitasker involved by giving them a question or two to ask the group. Or put them in charge of the biblical study questions. By giving them a leadership role, they are more likely to be engaged throughout the session.

Note: the objective of all of these techniques is to find ways to keep everyone focused. Of course, if small children are present, you may just need to learn to facilitate through the distractions.



## The Rambler

A rambler can seriously derail a small group meeting with rambling commentary that can be long-winded, convoluted, and even confusing. It is common for ramblers to stray into areas bearing little or no resemblance to the topic at hand. The rambler not only eats up precious time, but can also cause the discussion to veer off into totally unrelated and unhelpful avenues.

**Here are 5 techniques for effectively managing a Rambler, always being sensitive in your approach and doing everything out of love:**

- Simply raise your hand and gently interrupt the rambler to ask a question, such as, “*Can you remind us how this story connects to the question? I’m a little lost...*”
- Always have a printed copy of the *Small Group Midweek Guide* readily available, and when conversation strays off topic, hold up the guide and point to the specific question being discussed to refocus the group.
- State a time limit for each question (i.e. 5 minutes) in order to focus the group. You can also ask someone else to provide a 1-minute warning before the scheduled end time for each question.
- At the start of the meeting, hold up a blank piece of paper and state you will be adding any stray topics to a “parking lot” list in order to keep the group focused. Then, if there is time available at the end, the group can choose to discuss these additional topics.
- Assign someone in the group to act as the “rambler police” (use a badge if appropriate). This person is responsible for raising their hand anytime the discussion veers off topic.

Note: the objective of all of these techniques is to find ways to help everyone remain focused.

## Additional Facilitation Techniques

Remember, there are a variety of facilitation techniques at your disposal, and these techniques enable you to be assertive while preserving relationships.

- **Get to know all participants.** Spending time with each person outside of the small group is the best way to know how to approach them during a group discussion. This also provides the opportunity to discuss distracting behavior in a private setting,
- **Leverage the power of questions.** Questioning is a powerful way to deliver a difficult message and/or change the group focus. Instead of saying, “*John, I think we need to move on. We don’t have time to continue listening to your stories,*” turn it into a question: “*John, it sounds like you have had an interesting experience here. What specifically would you say was the experience of faith?*”
- **Use a “progressive discipline” approach.** Start with less assertive techniques before progressing to more assertive ones. Many will respond to very mild interventions.



- **Act early and quickly.** You need to send a very clear signal to the group that you will address counterproductive behavior quickly. It becomes MUCH more difficult to correct the behavior when it's been left unchecked. It's better to err on the side of being stricter early on and more lenient later (instead of the opposite approach).
- **Always act on behalf of the group.** When addressing an individual about their behavior, remember that you're stepping in on behalf of the entire group. It's never a situation of "you" vs. "them" which you can reinforce with your wording. Example: *"Jeff, I understand that you feel the need to share your story. You'll recall that one of our core objectives is to provide an opportunity for all to share here. With that in mind, let's allow time for others to share. Ok?"*

Finally, as a facilitator, it is important to always consider how *your own behavior* might be enabling others in the group. For example:

- The Dominator might be a close friend of yours or you've shared many experiences together, so your frequent eye contact with this person might give them the impression that you want them to answer or speak often.
- Perhaps you have a few Multitaskers in your group because *you* are talking too much, or haven't given enough thought to the flow of the discussion.
- The Rambler had a rough day and what they really need is simply a little soul-care.

Of course, showing up a little early to greet people can help you understand each person's current state and needs. Or you might find some one-on-one discussion about their behavior after the small group discussion is all that is needed.