

## Dealing with Difficult Situations and Deadlocks

In all dialogues that deal with conflicts, it is “normal” that the process of communication will occasionally run into difficult situations: Participants may become angry, interrupt each other vehemently, claim that they have been offended by statements from other participants, leave the room in anger, or – worse – threaten each other indirectly with violent action. Similar challenges can appear in the context of dialoguing – or rather discussing – contested issues and deep disagreements. In these situations, the facilitators or trainer might not even observe hostile behaviour, but it becomes obvious that the discussion moves into a deadlock or a blockade by one or both parties. For these cases, it is helpful if the facilitators have a spectrum of tools at their disposal to deal with the situation constructively.

**Use First-aid empathy:** Participants who express strong emotions, anger, and aggression in particular, should be directly addressed by voicing their feelings (“You are really upset and would like to leave immediately?”) and by referring to the needs or fears behind these feelings (“You want that some concrete steps are finally taken to address this problem?”). The facilitator then works to identify concrete ways forward (for example: “What could these steps be?”). Do not take sides with these participants and keep your multipartial distance but acknowledge the strong feelings.

**Remind participants of the ten principles and agreed ground rules of dialogues:** Time and again, communication on contested issues will slide towards discussion and debate, sometimes in a heated fashion in which the participants only throw arguments at each other, interrupt each other, or start lecturing each other while some retreat into silence. In these moments the facilitators can ask: “Are we still in a mode of dialogue with each other, or how would you describe this mode of communication?” This situation can then be used to remind the participants of the ground rules agreed upon at the beginning, or to introduce new ones.

**Have creative breaks:** Sometimes, it is also advisable to break a bogged-down situation with the simple suggestion to go into the next tea and coffee break. During this break either the facilitator or other participants can engage with the main protagonists and mitigate or at least de-escalate the controversy.

**Establish a sound knowledge base accessible for all participants:** Many of the contested issues which will come up in the dialogue have been addressed in the past and in other contexts. It is, therefore, advisable to collect information on these issues and how they were addressed in other contexts. This information should be easily available, which requires an adequate infrastructure.

**Mobilise external expertise:** Similar to the preceding point, it will be helpful to utilise the available expertise among scholars and practitioners who have dealt with similar challenges in the past. For example, when you are holding a series of dialogue or negotiation meetings and are preparing a roadmap for the dialogue process, you can negotiate with the represented parties to invite external experts for sessions on certain topics.

**Initiate multipartial deadlock-breaking team(s):** As a kind of safety-net, it is advisable to establish at least one sub-group among the working groups that includes persons with strong communicative and problem-solving skills and to ask them to function as a deadlock-breaking team.

**Introduce creative tools into the dialogue, e.g. “fishbowl” sessions:** A widely used tool for deepening dialogues is the fishbowl session. The facilitators invite a small number of participants into an inner circle, while the other participants stay in the outer circle. During the fishbowl session, only the persons in the inner circle are allowed to talk. This tool allows focusing the dialogue on a small number of participants with a particular role or interest in the topic at stake. It helps to facilitate a more in-depth exchange of statements and obliges the outside participants to concentrate on comparative listening. It can be useful for exploring intra-party as well as inter-party perspectives. To create an outlet for the outer circle, one chair in

the inner circle can be left empty, enabling the people in the outer circle to come in for a particular contribution.

**Take self-care measures:** It is easy for facilitators or trainers to become overwhelmed or insecure in difficult situations. In contexts of violence-prone political or social conflict, it is also common for facilitators to become targets of the tensions and projections of those caught up in the conflict. It is more important to stay grounded when the situation heats up. To prepare yourself for staying calm and acting intentionally – rather than reactively – in such situations, you can learn and practice various techniques and skills.

With respect to self-care, another basic recommendation is to work in the facilitation team and to make sure to get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses. As a result, you can hand over the facilitation to another team member when the situation threatens to overwhelm you or get out of your control. It is also advisable to designate one team member as an observer for each session. This person can focus on observing group dynamics and can serve an early warning function when unforeseen tensions arise within the group. The observer can also provide valuable insights for the planning and adjustment of subsequent dialogue sessions at daily debriefing.

## Source

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