

DEMOTIVATOR

Attack of the Misguided Meeting

BY FRAN HOWARD

**Shrewd vs. Sly — Confident vs. Arrogant — Passionate vs. Impulsive
Humorous vs. Inappropriate — Strong vs. Rigid — Detailed vs. Nitpicking**

Did you hear the one about Ole and Lena? They were sitting in a meeting when they got caught in this ridiculous argument. Lena wanted to be right. Ole knew he was right. And the argument took on a life of its own. Soon Sven was doodling in his notebook as others in attendance either got up and walked out or began to daydream about what it was they needed to pick up at the corner grocery on their way home from work.

In that quick scenario are sure signs that a meeting has turned sour, and one big "Don't." Dave Weiner, CEO of the Chicago-based Marketing Support and author of *Power Freaks*, says that the worst sign that a meeting has turned south is when one, two or three people get into a separate argument. "This occurs when a dominant personality clashes with one or two others and gets into a ridiculous argument, almost like a husband and wife," he says. "This is an enormous distraction. It's about who's right and who's wrong, not about the truth."

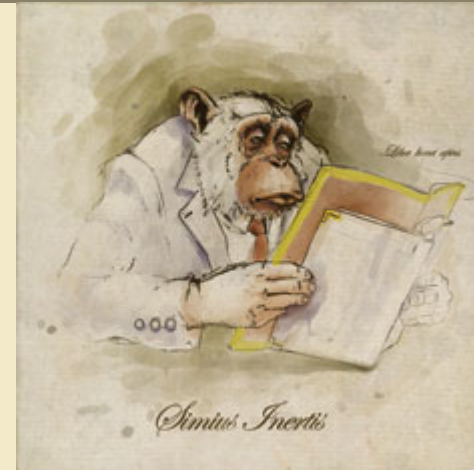
As for the one big "Don't": Unless you are a comedian, don't begin a meeting (or an article?) with a joke. Facilitating an in-house corporate meeting or off-site sales or team-building session is serious business and it takes not only well-developed skills to pull it off, but also the right personality. Having the wrong leader at the helm or not being aware of your own shortcomings if you are the leader can cause a meeting to unravel, leaving attendees deflated and demoralized.

Unfortunately, those attitudes are more common around the conference table than you may think. Demoralized employees are common in today's workplace. The corporate environment where pension plans are being eliminated and companies are continually downsizing to please shareholders is creating a growing disloyalty, which not only brings out the darker side of people's personalities, but also makes it easier for them to misbehave. "The agenda has changed from what's good for the company to what's good for me," says Weiner.

People in leadership positions today are afraid of offending, says Glenn Shepard, president of the Nashville, Tenn.-based Glen Shepard Seminars and author of *How to Manage Problem Employees*. "They are scared to set boundaries, due in part to our lawsuit-happy society. Because of a few bad apples, managers think they have to hear every complaint, but the worst place to hear a complaint is in a meeting. It quickly turns into a gripe session," Shepard says. "There is strength in numbers. People will say something in a meeting that they would never say one-on-one to their boss."

BRING IN THE APES

No one would argue with the old adage that "people are people," but according to one expert, they're also a lot like chimpanzees. Richard Conniff, author of *The Ape in the Corner Office: Understanding the Beast in All of Us*, says people are 94.8 percent genetically identical to chimpanzees. "Some argue that it gives us an excuse to be big and bad," Conniff says. Just like chimps, people also travel in packs. "Chimpanzees always have a coalition that hangs together and supports each



Problem Facilitators

Minnesota—Style

Minnesotans have long been known for their unique style and personality. And while a Minnesotan can certainly leave the state—although we don't know why they'd want to—they'll still let a "ya sure" or a "you betcha" slip every once in a while that gives them away. Here are a few problem personalities you may have encountered across a conference table in this neck of the northwoods.

Paul Bunyan

Just like Minnesota's northwoods icon, the Paul Bunyan of meetings pushes through his agenda regardless of what other people want. Instead of cutting down northern forests, this aggressive personality fells other's ideas, getting a few personal jabs in as well.

Ms. Minnesota

Nice, nicer and nicest, this personality is impossible in meetings. She's too nice to speak up. Too nice to disagree. Too nice to take any heat. But more importantly, she's too nice to facilitate a meeting. If she's all about "agreeable," which she will be,

other," says Conniff. "You can tell members of the coalition by their body language, the way they nod, the way they speak." The same behavior can be seen in meetings.

"Chimpanzees are notorious for being aggressive and nasty to one another, yet only 5 percent of their time is spent being nasty and 20 percent is spent grooming one another," Conniff says. "Humans should be able to do better." Yet often they don't. Numerous tests and labels exist for the various personality types, but all single out a dominant personality, also known as the alpha, aggressive or bully. In meetings, these people are usually the biggest offenders.

"The person who has dominance, who is high ranking, can glower at people to intimidate them so they don't talk," says Conniff. "In chimpanzee groups, the alpha male is big and fierce and gets others to back away," the opposite effect of what meeting facilitators hope to achieve. Alphas also give out body signals that indicate they are in charge. In a meeting setting, that behavior might look like this: Once everyone has sat down, the facilitator stands up, removes his coat, loosens his tie and sprawls. Because of the leader's chosen timing, anyone who would dare follow suit would appear to be mocking. So everyone stays buttoned up and feels demoralized as the leader continues to reinforce his power through alpha behavior.

The aggressive personality is also known as a bully. In meetings, bullies tend to talk a lot, they're argumentative, they try to get their agenda through, they're loud and they can be very confrontational, says Gini Graham Scott, director of the Oakland, Calif.-based Changemakers and Creative Communications & Research, and author of *A Survival Guide for Working With Humans* and *A Survival Guide for Working With Bad Bosses*. A leader who is faced with one of these personalities needs to diminish the disruption and bring the meeting back to the issue at hand by calling on others. If the behavior continues unchecked, the facilitator begins to feel cowed, which makes it easy for the aggressor to continue the offensive behavior.

The passive aggressive personality is the one to really watch out for, says Shepard. These people are childish. "They won't attack toe-to-toe, but in clever, veiled ways," he says. "Instead of saying, 'You're being a real jerk,' they use sarcasm and say, 'Did someone wake up on the wrong side of the bed today?'" A rule of management is never to confront anyone in front of other employees. Passive aggressive personalities like to exploit this rule similar to the way a 7-year-old waits to act up until company arrives. The quickest remedy for dealing with this personality, however, is to break the "do not confront" rule. "When you get the comment and then the huff, ask: 'What did you mean by that?' Passive aggressive personalities are afraid of direct contact," Shepard says. "And that's why they always take the back-handed route. If not confronted, the sniping will grow and others will join in. It will spread like wildfire." It's like the heckler at a standup comedy show. If a comedian doesn't put a heckler in his or her place, everyone will begin throwing tomatoes.

The other common personality that can cause meeting discomfort is the passive, or submissive person. This personality, rarely in a leadership position, presents a challenge for meeting facilitators. They don't participate and they don't commit. Using the attorney's cardinal rule of never asking a witness a question you don't know the answer to, Shepard suggests drawing out passive personalities by first asking healthier employees (but only those who you can count on for a reasoned answer) for feedback. Once everyone else has jumped into the pool, ask the passive person for feedback.

Shepard says it is fairly easy to see from a leadership perspective which group you fit into by asking yourself three simple questions: 1.) Is it more important to me to be respected or liked? If the answer is liked, then you tend toward passive and, frankly, you should not be in a position of leadership; 2.) How often do I get into a confrontation, and after it's over, think this is what I should have said? If the perfect comeback always comes an hour or two after the incident, you have a tendency toward being passive aggressive; 3.) Do I get pleasure out of unnerving other people? If so, you lean toward aggressive.

Know Thyself

Now that you've taken a quick personality test, you may think, "Whew! Sure glad I don't fall into any of those problem personality categories." Not so fast. According to Mark Goulston, author of *Get Out of Your Own Way at Work ...and Help Others Do the Same*, emotional ignorance—defined as being clueless about how others see you and about how you see others—is also prominent in today's workplace.

"Unless you are terribly bright or brilliant, people will be unforgiving of emotional ignorance," says the L.A.-based Goulston. "The more brilliant you are, the more emotional ignorance you can get away with." The rest of us need to try to become more observant and self reflective. Following are six personality trait categories where emotional ignorance is common, according to Goulston.

Shrewd vs. Sly: You may feel you are being efficient and effective, but others may look at you as someone who is cutting corners. "If you are taking pride in being shrewd, crowing about your skill as a master manipulator, people will see you as sly," he says.

Confident/Having Strong Opinions vs. Arrogant/Opinionated: It is one thing during a meeting to say: "I believe this is what we need to do and this is what we are going to do because it makes the most sense." But if you add "and you don't understand the basics of what we've gone through here," you've crossed the line from being a confident leader with strong opinions to being an arrogant, opinionated jerk. The phrases "you don't," "you always," "you never," and "you don't know" are telltale signs of arrogance.

let her do the greeting, not the meeting.

Louie Anderson

Unlike old Louie, the amateur office comedian typically wastes peoples' time trying to be funny. If you don't get paid to be a comedian, don't try being one in a meeting. People may laugh, but they are probably laughing at you, not at your jokes

Gopher Gal

Indecision is the hallmark of this personality type. Should she cross the road or not? Hide in her hole or come out into the sunshine? Getting a commitment from this personality is impossible. With Gopher Gal in charge, it's tough to feel a sense of "meeting accomplished."

Jerry Lundegaard

Of Fargo fame, used car salesman Jerry Lundegaard has all the characteristics of a passive aggressive. While keeping up appearances of the happily married husband, Lundegaard hires small-time criminals to kidnap his wife in an attempt to collect a hefty ransom from his rich father-in-law. This meeting personality may be difficult to spot at first, because he or she appears to be agreeable. Just wait. Within time, you'll be able to pick out the Lundegaards. They're the ones who fail to meet their promises and who begin to find ways to unravel the meeting or project because of it.

Which Personality Are You?

After a few years in the workplace, almost everyone has picked up a few BAD habits. Our experts have developed a few tests to help you determine where your strengths and weaknesses lie. Here are a few online quizzes you can take to see how you stack up.

The Ape's Quiz

By answering seven questions, you'll be able to determine whether you are ready to become the ape in the corner office, or if you are doomed to become the ape's lunch. www.apelinthecorneroffice.com/test_welcome

What's Your Survival Quotient? A Self-Assessment Quiz

This quiz (printed in the book) rates your ability to survive in the workplace. The lower your score, the lower your chances of thriving. You'll rate yourself in 25 categories, including communication, attitude, ethical dilemmas, backing down and trust. www.workingwithhumans.com

Power Freak?

How much of a power freak are you? After answering 12 quick questions in the Limbic Power Quiz, you'll see how you rate on a scale of 1 to 10. You can also check out how you compare with the general population. www.powerfreaks.com

How Bad is Your Boss? An Assessment Quiz

Rate your boss on aggressiveness, control, gamesmanship, fairness and lack of training, among other things, to see how he or she truly stacks up. www.badbosses.net/chapters.htm

Every Quiz Under the Sun

If the above quizzes are not comprehensive enough for your taste, you can always depend on Google for a bounty of tests, tools and brainteasers. Type in "personality test" for 17 million-plus results.

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Energetic/Passionate vs. Hyper/Impulsive: Energetic, passionate people draw others to their cause. They commonly use phrases like, "This is a terrific opportunity!" or "We're ahead of the competition, so let's not lose the momentum!" They also back up their enthusiasm with facts and details. In contrast, the hyper and impulsive leader falls short on details, saying things like "Let's do this!" or "We're going to do this because it's great!" These people are adrenaline junkies, jumping from one thing to the next, demotivating and demoralizing those around them. People often respond to them by not following through on plans because they expect hyper and impulsive individuals to change their mind before the project or plan is carried out. Planning is immaterial to hyper people. When others ask them about their plan, they get irritable.

Humorous vs. Inappropriate: Humorous people find humor in situations. They can chuckle spontaneously and make a spontaneous comment in good taste. People that go out of their way to tell a story, particularly any joke that lasts longer than 15 seconds, are usually being inappropriate. Any joke or comment told at the expense of someone else is definitely inappropriate.

Strong vs. Rigid: Strong is having the courage of your convictions when those convictions are based on doing what's right. Rigid is having to be right.

Detail-Oriented vs. Nitpicking: A detail-oriented person has covered all the details, but doesn't bore everyone by citing them all. In contrast, the nitpicker communicates all the tedious unnecessary details. IT people are notorious for being nitpickers, Goulston says, and the reason they tend to go on even after everyone's eyes have glossed over is because they know they've gone too far. "Instead of cutting their losses, they keep talking, trying to recapture people's attention," he adds. The audience may be nodding politely, but everyone is silently screaming, "Cut to the chase already."

Not seeing yourself as others see you is also symptomatic of character disorders such as narcissism. Narcissistic facilitators obsess about their own grandiosity and may veto solid plans and ideas simply because they aren't theirs. "Narcissists are preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success," notes Weiner. "They will develop detailed challenges and be fanatic in their beliefs because they do, in fact, begin to believe their own irrational thinking." Motivational speakers or meeting facilitators with narcissistic tendencies can leave attendees of sales meetings or team-building sessions flat.

One participant in a local daily sales meeting recalled for this article an incident in which the meeting facilitator (a passive-aggressive, nitpicking narcissist) rambled on so long that his staff began to complain that the morning meetings were running over schedule. Instead of cutting his comments short in response, this particular facilitator made his staff stand through the entire meeting to encourage them to keep their comments short, while he continued to sit comfortably talking as much as he wanted.

The Don'ts

Even emotionally healthy facilitators can unknowingly make mistakes from time to time that alienate and demoralize meeting attendees. John Sweeney is the owner of Minneapolis' renowned Brave New Workshop, and a keynote speaker and author of several business publications. "As a comedian and a performer," says Sweeney, "your likeability factor is subjective and the most important thing in holding an audience. If meeting facilitators, even bright, well-intentioned ones, don't get the audience to like them in the first 15 to 20 seconds, they'll lose everyone. I've seen facilitators tell a group in the first 20 seconds what was wrong with the group—or the company—and how they were going to fix what was wrong in the next hour." This let-me-fix-it approach rarely, if ever, plays out well.

"Just because you have an important-everyone-should-listen message, that doesn't mean they will listen," he says. "If the ears are closed—the receptacles of your message shut down—it doesn't matter what your message is." For those who don't want their audience to shut down because of something they've done, Sweeney has come up with his own list of don'ts.

- **DON'T** start a meeting letting those in attendance know who you are. Starting with the phrase "for those who don't know me" alerts an audience that you plan to tell them exactly how important you are.
- **DON'T** begin with a trite, rhetorical question, such as, "Who would be interested in increasing profits?"
- **DON'T** say: "What I'm hoping to accomplish in the next two hours." The cynic will think, "Oh, so I'm only here to help you with your agenda."
- **DON'T** set up distance by using your title if it were different than the titles of those in the room. Establish your role as a partner instead of a lecturer or leader.
- **DON'T** discount entire age groups by saying something like, "I've been thinking about this ever since you were in diapers."
- **DON'T** communicate stress as panic by opening a meeting with: "Everyone knows we are overwhelmed, but in the next hour, we have to accomplish what would typically take three weeks." You'll only succeed in making everyone mad that they now have a three-week project to complete in an hour.
- **DON'T** devalue the process the group is about to go through by saying something like, "I know we all hate the annual

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BOTTOM LINE

In today's workplace, where jobs are being eliminated nearly every day, everyone, including the meeting planner, is vying for a corner office, or at least trying to hold onto the cubicle they already have. This sort of atmosphere can bring out the worst in a pack of chimpanzees, who are not all that much different from humans, mind you, particularly in a meeting setting. Whether it's in-fighting, inappropriate humor, lack of planning or just plain arrogance, bad behavior on the part of the facilitator or the attendees can unravel a meeting, sending everyone either physically, or worse yet,

reporting process, but ..."

One of the biggest mistakes meeting leaders can make, says Sweeney, is to assume everyone has a personality similar to theirs. "Some people want to slide under the table when the over-caffeinated facilitator starts out with 'Hey everyone, it's time to brainstorm!'" Not everyone will be excited, and lack of enthusiasm is not something to get mad about, Sweeney adds. Good facilitators, while keeping problem personalities in check, allow people to be themselves, and to express themselves in various ways.

From the field

Fred Baumer, vice president in BI's Strategy Group, Minneapolis, says there are a few mistakes meeting facilitators make that, in his experience, come up again and again. The first is when the person talking has not thought through the question he or she is trying to answer in the audience's head. "In other words," he says, "the presenter delivers information that does not touch the life of the person receiving it." For example, if someone from marketing is presenting to sales, that person may come in with 30 slides detailing the reliability of the product (remember the nitpicker) when all sales is interested in is how much the product costs and how it will benefit the customer. "I tell marketing to set aside the first 30 slides," Baumer notes. "If someone wants to know about reliability, then marketing can bring out the slides. We are riddled with this kind of presentation."

Whether the lack of connection with the audience is due to nitpicking or lack of planning, the result is the same. Those in attendance start to fume because their time could be better spent getting their work done or at home with their families. Kathleen Haase, a Maple Grove, Minn.-based supervisor of the meeting, event and tradeshow department at Boston Scientific, recently attended a trade organization meeting of about 50 people in which the presentation's objectives were laid out differently than what the speaker actually presented, and the speaker (probably tending toward passive) didn't stop the process. "People started leaving. At the end, there were only two people left in the audience, me and someone else," she says. "The objective wasn't being met. The objective wasn't outlined very well. It was very painful and the speaker kept apologizing and that made it worse."

One of the crucial mistakes presenters can make, Baumer says, is to believe that the crux of the presentation is the PowerPoint deck. "The assumption is: I can read the slides and you will understand," says Baumer. "Where once visuals enhanced the speaker's credibility, now the speaker enhances the credibility of the PowerPoint presentation." Baumer recently attended a presentation in which the speaker was literally in the dark between two large screens. The audience could view the speaker's PowerPoint presentation and hear the speaker's voice, but the speaker was invisible. "It made me feel like you could have sent the presentation to me in an e-mail," he says.

Haase, too, says she has participated in meetings when she worked for former employers in which "the level of energy dissolves, meetings in which the speaker is more of a PowerPoint reader than a PowerPoint energizer. This type of speaker doesn't elicit audience participation." It's like being in a college class where you are expected to memorize and retain information.

Not having the appropriate venue or not having the capability of controlling the environment can also unravel a meeting. The shape and size of the room can make a big difference, says Claudia Bursch, site and contract manager for the Alexandria, Minn.-based Tastefully Simple Inc. "You can get 100 square feet from a space that's one-foot by 100-feet or from a room that's 10-feet-by-10-feet," she says. "That example is extreme, but you can see that it really can make a big difference. Also, a room that's too hot or too cold, or not having someone at the door to be sure the noise created by people leaving and entering the room is minimized, can create ongoing distractions."

Haase remembers hearing of one such meeting from her coworkers who were involved in a Who Moved My Cheese?-themed meeting a few years ago when the book was popular. Everything that could go wrong did. "The building was being gutted. The speaker was an hour late and those in charge had an hour in which to do a song-and-dance routine," Haase says. When the presenter, who was scheduled for the day, finally did arrive, he tried to make up time by cramming in all his information. "It was a tragedy of errors," Haase says. "It was a Who Moved My Cheese the Wrong Way? meeting." Haase's coworkers felt like they wasted two days traveling when they could have been home with their families.

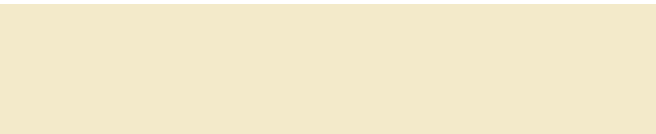
Meetings, particularly today, need to be interactive. Some planners make the mistake of thinking of meetings as information dumps. People depart meetings that have a full slate of PowerPoint presentations, but no networking opportunities, with no experience of even being at the event, says Baumer. Ask yourself, "What would people miss by not being here?" If the entire meeting can be sent to them on CD-ROM, or summed up in an e-mail if the meeting was a sham to push your agenda through (aggressive behavior), the answer is nothing.

All of these personality guffaws and planning mistakes can send employees to the water cooler for a post-meeting dish session, and that's not an appropriate meeting objective. After all, everyone involved in the meeting is expending energy in the meeting's direction at the expense of other duties. The goal is to have something productive occur and to make everyone at the meeting feel valued and welcome.

Baumer says the best advice he ever received was from a former boss who said: "If you are calling the meeting, know the value of each person you are inviting, and reinforce that value somehow verbally during the meeting." This allows people to

mentally, toward the exit sign. A little self-reflection on the part of meeting facilitators can go a long way toward making sure the meeting atmosphere is healthy enough to cut to the truth—or better yet, accomplish your objectives.

be themselves, regardless of what personality flaws they may have. For example, let's say Lena typically throws cold water on any new idea brought to the table. Under Baumer's cardinal rule, despite her aggressive tendencies, Lena can still play a valuable role in a meeting by being the contrarian. If the facilitator announces to the group that Lena has been invited because she's good at recognizing the flaws in a plan, others will begin to look at her contributions as valuable. "I've been to a lot of meetings where the people there didn't know why they were there," Baumer says. They come demoralized and they leave demoralized—a situation remedied, perhaps, by having a truthful, willing and, maybe more importantly, observant facilitator guiding the meeting.



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