

Surviving Your Worst Meeting Nightmares

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When you lead a meeting, you're responsible for your coworkers' teamwork, their decisions — and their behavior. That means you should also be ready for potential hazards such as differences of opinion, personality conflicts, or even brash and outlandish remarks. Here's what to do when your meeting devolves into a worst-case scenario.

"If you disagree with a colleague's idea, you should..."

Propose a constructive alternative without being immediately dismissive. Mildred S. Myers, professor of management communication at Carnegie Mellon University, recommends the "sandwich technique": put a piece of constructive criticism (the meat) between two innocuous statements (the bread). For example: "I see that this is an idea with a lot of potential. One thing we'd have to address is this other thing. But I think we both can agree that we should look into your idea because we want to make sure that it succeeds." As facilitator, be sure to relate all critiques — be they yours or those given by other attendees — to the stated goal of the meeting.

"If a shouting match erupts, you should..."

Attempt to calm people down and, if necessary, suggest they leave the room to take a breather.

"It's the role of the person who's leading the meeting to keep things on track and to keep passion out of it," says Catherine Smith, a spokeswoman for Linden Lab, makers of the online virtual world Second Life. "The addition of emotion into a conversation about work doesn't really serve anybody. There's a way to express how you feel without getting crazy about it."

If conflict between two employees becomes a repeat occurrence, talk to them individually or involve your company's HR department to see if they can't get their personal differences resolved.

"If someone makes a horribly racist/sexist/whateverist comment, you should..."

Depending on the severity of the comment, it may suffice to simply move on to the next item on the agenda. Richard Arnoldi, executive chef at the Ritz Carlton Washington, D.C. recommends saying, "Let's discuss that one-on-one," or "We can discuss that more later." He says it's often better to keep someone from putting their foot in their mouth by cutting them off but adds that, in his experience, episodes of this nature are very rare.

If the remark is substantially offensive, you may want to directly address the person during the meeting and let them know that what they said was inappropriate. J.S. O'Rourke, a professor of

management at Notre Dame University, warns that allowing comments like this to happen more than once could open the organization to potential litigation for creating a hostile work environment. He suggests that a leader should say something like: "That's not how we see it here. I want everyone in the room to understand that I disagree with what's just been said, and that as an organization we have an obligation to do better." Leave it at that and move on to the next topic.

"If someone falls asleep, you should..."

If a person is nodding in and out of sleep, it's probably best just to leave them alone — they'll likely come to on their own anyway. However, if someone starts snoring, go ahead and wake them up. It's not necessary to scold them; the fact that you woke them up will be embarrassing enough. If it bothers you enough, after the meeting you may want to make a private, semi-joking remark to indicate that the behavior was noticed. Prof. Irv Schenkler, director of management communication at the Stern School of Business at New York University, suggests something like: "It must have been a hard night for you. I know I had one, too."