

Meet, Greet, Grin and Adjust



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After a whirlwind month during which we hosted three, back-to-back risk conferences, life at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center has returned to “normal.” What’s normal? Working with dedicated leaders from a diverse array of mission-directed public entities and nonprofits on projects ranging from the development of a cloud application for one client’s 2,800 stakeholder organizations, to performing risk assessments and designing in-person and online training.

During a planning session for one of the workshops we’re delivering later this month, our team began talking about how personality types and communication styles contribute to the success of a meeting. And since we generally don’t know the personalities and styles of the staff members who will be attending one of our custom workshops, we need to be prepared for anything. On that topic, Director of Client Solutions Kay Nakamura shared two articles that poke fun at the personalities that too often derail thoughtful agendas and the important goal of engaging everyone around the table. If you’ve ever attended a brainstorming session, you’ve probably met a few of these troubling attendee types.

From the *Black Enterprise* article, “[Top 5 Most Annoying—And Productivity-Stealing—Personalities in a Meeting](#),” meet Mr. Talk Alot and Ms. Micro-Issue:

- **Mr. Talk Alot:** According to writer Janell Hazelwood, what delights this meeting attendee most is “the sound of their own voice.” She adds that Mr. Talk Alot is also the participant most likely to elaborate on points that need no further elaboration or engage in distracting side conversations.
- **Ms. Micro-Issue:** This label is assigned to the attendee who cleverly derails the agenda and draws the conversation to a topic that is of great interest and relevance to her, but is arguably off-track and inapplicable to the rest of the group.

From the *Fast Company* article, “[The Top Ten Meeting Personalities](#),” meet the Multitasker, the Disrupter and the Interrupter:

- **The Multitasker:** According to Jackie Yeane, Chief Marketing Officer of Premier Global Services, “All of us are guilty of multitasking during a meeting. Some of us are better at it than others.” Signs of a multitasker? According to Yeane, “when asked a question, the Multitasker frequently responds with, “Sorry, I missed that. Could you repeat that?”
- **The Disrupter:** Taking a risk by not knowing exactly how a meeting will wind up is half the fun for many people who attend lots and lots of meetings. But there is a downside to the risk as well. Yeane writes

that “Changing the topic or taking people down a side street, the Disrupter can sometimes uncover new thinking or creative ideas. But the Disrupter can also blow up an agenda and make other meeting participants irritable and cranky. You’ll know the Disrupter as they often end a sentence with “... but I digress.”

- **The Interrupter:** What meeting wouldn’t benefit from a few good ideas? Yes, but, there’s a time and place for every brilliant comment. Yeane cautions, “When a good idea comes to mind, the Interrupter can’t wait to present it to the group. And does ... right at that moment! This personality is not inherently bad because hey, it is a GOOD idea. But have caution: combining the Interrupter with distant relatives the Disrupter and the Long-Winded can create meeting anarchy.”

Risk Rescue for Derailed Meetings

Consider the risk tips below to prevent meetings from going off the rails, or to get them back on track when a familiar personality type gets in the way of your plans for a productive and meaningful conversation.

1. **Keep it Timely** – A great technique to keep a meeting on track is to adopt and follow a timed agenda. A timed agenda indicates the estimated time that will be devoted to each key discussion topic. It’s a great tool for the meeting minder (the chair or facilitator), particularly when that person (you know who you are!) has a hard time interrupting the attendee who seems determined to hear her voice from start to finish.
2. **Choose the Chair with Care** – Sometimes senior leaders in an entity aren’t the best meeting facilitators. That’s ok. If there are critical topics to discuss, consider choosing the best meeting facilitator, instead of the staff member at the highest pay grade. A great meeting leader knows how to gently move the discussion from topic to topic, how to engage the quiet attendees, and how to respectfully get the disrupters and interrupters to stand down.
3. **Keep a Plan B Close at Hand** – Meetings go off the rails for any number of reasons, including sabotage by a participant to “stuff happens.” When you fear your agenda is too skimpy for the time allotted, make sure you have a compelling, meaty topic in mind as an add-on. Always ask the group’s permission before going down the new path. If your concern is that the time may be inadequate, make certain you’ve identified one or two topics that can be postponed until the next time the group meets. Again, ask permission to take those topics off the table out of respect for the published end time for the meeting.
4. **Be Flexible** – A common mistake is to try to control the discussion and the outcomes. The truth is that the most rewarding workshops and meetings often bring things to light that had been hiding in the darkness for too long. Facilitators who lead scripted and rehearsed brainstorming sessions quickly lose credibility and respect. “Why are we here?” and “This was a waste of my time!” are sentiments you don’t want to hear in the hallway or read on the meeting evaluation form.

The futurists who predicted the demise of in-person meetings and conferences during the Internet age have thus far been proven wrong. Many associations are reporting record attendance at their annual conferences, and we heard over and over again at the Center’s recent risk events that conference and video calls are a poor substitute for face-to-face conversations about controversial and troubling risk topics. Yet even a thoughtful agenda is at risk of spiraling out of control when the usual suspects show up. By considering the risk of a meeting gone wrong before you conduct roll call, you’re in the best possible position to increase the odds that your next meeting, brainstorming session or workshop will be time well spent for all involved.

Melanie Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Melanie enjoys discussing risk issues against the backdrop of a nonprofit’s mission during custom workshops for Center clients. She welcomes your questions about risk management and the Center’s consulting services and cloud applications. She can be reached at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.