



Dealing with people who are dominating: for group facilitators

Extracted from [Group and team coaching](#) by Christine Thornton, Routledge 2010, available from Amazon and all good booksellers.

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Dealing with a dominator in a group is no time for the group coach to be a 'shrinking violet'. People who speak too much need active help, first from you and ultimately from the group, to gain a more realistic picture of their effect on others, and to modify their behaviour.

Opening gambits

Notice *when* and *with whom* it is happening

Near the start of the group? In a group with strong tensions? Some people talk too much when they are anxious. Consider tactics to make the group feel safer, such as giving a stronger lead yourself.

Be active in challenging

Dominating behaviour will undermine the group if you allow it to go on. You must be active in challenging it, and where it is persistent, train the group to be active in challenging it too.

Interrupt

Summarizing the last point the speaker made, or building on it, and asking others to give their response

Bring others in

Asking others to give their view; invite specific individuals to speak if you have observed someone who seems to have a view

Use gesture

Put your hand out as the dominator begins, and gesture to another member to speak

Restate the fundamentals

Restate that all sides of a question can only be explored if everyone has the opportunity to put their perspective across



If it goes on

Point out the dominance and invite the group to resolve it

With marked or persistent dominators this is your main strategy. To open the discussion, say something like 'We seem to be letting xxx do too much of the work. What do others think about . . .?'

Comment on the pace

To have a fruitful discussion it is important for people to have time to think, which cannot happen if the pace is too fast and furious. Ask everyone to limit the length of their contributions. This allows you to be more direct in challenging the dominator when they transgress.

Try humour

Point the behaviour out in a humorous way; be careful to challenge the *behaviour* rather than putting down the individual. Humour is less likely to be useful than an explicit approach, but it may be appropriate with some groups, particularly where there is a limited capacity or willingness to think about process. You can sometimes use humour with individuals, particularly when your other signals to speak less have been ignored.

In a structured learning group

Remind everyone of the protocols, especially the primacy of the turntaker's reflection and learning, and the need for a calm pace in order to think.

Be persistent

A persistent dominator will need persistent correction. Be prepared to be the broken record. Your modelling that the dominator can be stopped will encourage other group members to do it too.

Although the first task is to shut the person up so that others can speak, this is only a stop-gap. It helps the other people in the group in the short-term, but does not change the underlying feeling which makes the person speak so much. They are likely to repeat the pattern. If you continue to be the only one to shut them up, the group is likely to become less free in its responses in general. The whole group needs to be involved. If they continue to leave it to you, become curious about why that is. Here are some further strategies.

Give feedback

It will be necessary to draw attention to the pattern to help the dominator realize what s/he is doing, and what the effect is on the group. Dominators lack empathy and so need feedback.



Contrast communication and speech

Paradoxically, sometimes people speak a lot as a way of avoiding communication. The spate of words bemuses the listeners and only confusion is conveyed. Make the confusion explicit and involve the group in becoming more thoughtful about how each of their communications contribute to the task. You can also use this to check the flow from the dominator – how does what they are saying contribute to the group's progress on the task?

Ask about what the others in the group get out of the domination

Dominators can only dominate if the rest of the group let them. How does everyone else gain? Are they let off the hook? Are they afraid to challenge a boss or senior colleague? Are they relieved of the need to take a risk? Raising the question of what the rest of the group gains is an understated way of making the domination an explicit group problem, and involving the group in resolving it.

Become curious about what the dominator gets out of the domination

Is it status? Is it reassurance? Is it attention? Is it control? Is it an avoidance of the issues? It is helpful to clarify your own ideas about the source of the over-activity. For group coaches, it is usually *not* helpful to make these ideas explicit, but an opportunity may arise to invite the dominator to reflect on their own behaviour.

Take the dominator aside

The problem must be resolved in the group, but some dominators may benefit from one-to-one feedback and an opportunity to reflect – in effect individual coaching to help them work more effectively in the group.