Ten Common Group Problems & What the Facilitator Can Do About Them

Adapted from: Scholtes, Peter. (1988). <u>The Team Handbook</u>. Madison, WI: Joiner & Associates, Inc.

Group Problem	What the Facilitator Can Do
Floundering – Group has trouble starting and ending, making decisions, moving on, reaching consensus, staying on task. Possible explanations are that the group is unclear or overwhelmed by task; individuals are not formed as a team yet; their work is not the product of consensus; the group has bonded and is unwilling to separate at end of charge.	☐ **Clarify task** – "Let's review our objective and make sure it's clear to everyone." ☐ **Ground in the triggering question** – Keep repeating the task or question at hand. ☐ **Develop action agendas** – Write agenda items as tasks rather than topics. Check off as done. ☐ **Keep their work transparent** – List all ideas. Chart pros/cons of each idea. List action steps. ☐ **Constantly check consensus** – "We have one proposal. Are there others? Rationale for option 1? Option 2? Show your preference." <u>Other ideas:</u> ☐
Overbearing Participants – Some members wield a disproportionate amount of influence in the group, perhaps because of authority by position or expertise. These members may discourage discussion encroaching their expertise ("We are taking care of that… What you don't understand is… We tried that in 1968 but…"). They may signal "untouchability" of an area by using technical jargon or by talking in absolutes. ("The only feasible solution is…"; "Section VB of Code XYZ clearly states…")	☐ **Protect the autonomy & authenticity of <u>every</u> individual** – Establish upfront that it is important to elicit the <u>full</u> dimensionality of the design effort and that every person's input matters. ☐ **Separate clarification from evaluation task** During reporting of ideas, only allow individuals to clarify the author's meaning – not to evaluate each other's contributions. Value learning. ☐ **Neutrally invite differences grounded back in triggering question** – "What <u>other</u> ideas came to mind when asked…? What are <u>different</u> perspectives on …?" "Similarities?/Differences?" ☐ **Ask Role or Expertise Redirecting Questions** – "Karen, from a parent's perspective, what might be the three most important child outcomes?" <u>Other ideas:</u> ☐

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Dominating Participants – Some members who, may or may not have authority or expertise, consume too much "air time." They talk too much, over-explain, tell overlong anecdotes, fill normal group silences. Some dominating participants do so because they feel that their input is not being heard or valued. Dominating may be a reflection of individual style (some people "think outloud" – they "talk to think" while others "think then talk"). Another explanation is that some people express themselves through story or experiences while group work often requires individuals to function at an interpretive or decisional level.	☐ **Record or reflect the essence** – "Let's see if I have your core concern before we move onto Cindy." ☐ **Use Nominal Group Technique** – Brainstorm and collect one idea per person with no discussion. Keep going until all ideas shared. ☐ **Post "Equitable Participation"** as an explicit ground rule and reinforce it. ☐ **Practice "Gate-Keeping"** – "Let's hear from someone who has not had a turn…" ☐ **Short-circuit with ORID Questioning** – Ask an objective question ("So what happened?"); reflective question ("How did that make you feel?"); interpretive question ("How would you summarize the problem?") decisional question ("And what do you propose?"). ☐ **"Stack" participants** - "Bill, then Tony, then Julie, then we'll need to break for lunch." Other ideas: ☐
Reluctant Participants – Some members rarely speak though they may be listening. This may be a function of the process (pace too quick, focus unclear, task not important), a function of team make-up (unbalanced participation) or a function of individual style (introverted, selective talker, thinks then talks, etc.)	☐ **Use Nominal Group Technique** ☐ **Post "Balance of Participation"** as an explicit ground rule. Stress *active* participation as a responsibility. ☐ **Use small group or partner activities** ☐ **Practice "Gate-Keeping"** – "Does anyone else have ideas about this?" (while looking at person); or, more directly, "Sam, what is your experience with this?" ☐ **Build in active listening activities** – For example, "Raise your stakeholder card if the idea being shared is common to your stakeholder experience." Then call on reluctant participant to explain his experience. Other ideas: ☐

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Unquestioned Acceptance of Opinions as Facts – Some members express personal beliefs and assumptions with such confidence that other listeners assume they are hearing facts.	☐ **List "Evidence-Based Decision Making"** as an explicit groundrule. Consistently call for evidence to support contributions. ☐ **Clarify assumptions** – "Talk about your experiences or research that you're familiar with that explain your assertion." Or "What research or data supports your perspective?" ☐ **Similarities/Differences** - Follow-up the person's comment asking the group for similar perspectives/different perspectives. Other ideas: ☐
Rush to Accomplishment – Some participants want to "just do it" and are impatient for group outcomes. This person may not value group process, may be set on an individual solution, may feel pressured by urgency or deadlines, may be decision-oriented. Too much pressure can lead a group in a series of random, unsystematic efforts to make improvements or may lead to a solution without full team support.	☐ **Display project timelines** – Seeing the project tasked out to completion can help. ☐ **Clarify project parameters** – "It is important that we come up with a solution that all group members can support." Or "We must ascertain that our solution is scientific/best practice." ☐ **Table the proposed solution** – Get the person's thinking clearly understood and documented for consideration but table acting on it until everyone fully understands the design task and has had a chance to carefully consider the full array of possible solutions. ☐ **Vary process expectations** – Vary activities to fit all participant's process preferences. Other ideas: ☐

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Early Evaluators – Often times conversations informally or formally start with generative discussion. Someone poses a question that openly calls for ideas to be freely shared. Some people are able to suspend comfortably in brainstorming forums while others tend to listen evaluatively. Early evaluators judge ideas before individuals have a chance to form them clearly, present them fully, or consider them in relation to other ideas.	☐ **Structure dialogue** so that brainstorming or clarification are clearly distinctive steps from evaluation. "Suspend evaluation in order to understand." ☐ **Use Nominal Group Technique** ☐ **Chart all ideas** – as they are proposed as a visible reminder that you are generating all the possibilities. Other ideas: ☐
Discounts and "Plops" – Sometimes group members discredit or fail to give notice to another's opinions. Sometimes a statement is made that "plops". No one acknowledges it or the conversation picks up in a totally different direction. Some discounted comments are irrelevant; others are relevant but the meaning is missed. Sometimes the next speaker has a preconceived comment that they're making in response to a much earlier point in the conversation. No matter what the reason, discounted members may need help articulating or surfacing points that are important to them.	☐ **Parrot the plopped comment** – "So Sally you're saying…before that, Dave commented that…." ☐ **Slow down the dialogue** – "It seems that we have at least two strands of dialogue going on. Some of you are discussing X and others discussing Y. Let's focus on topic X then turn completely to topic Y." ☐ **Protect the autonomy and authenticity of every individual** – Establish upfront that it is important to elicit the full dimensionality of the design effort and that every person's input matters. ☐ **Post "Keep it Constructive"** as a groundrule. This can mean keep it positive but also to build on each other's ideas. ☐ **Post "Open but Focused Dialogue** as a groundrule. "Remember, all answers are permissible as long as they're focused on the triggering question at hand." Other ideas: ☐

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Wanderlust: Digression & Tangents – When group members lose track of the meeting's purpose or want to avoid a sensitive topic, discussions often wander off in many directions at once. Wanderings can sometimes be loosely chained where one person says something that triggers another persons related experience that triggers a third person until the topic being discussed doesn't seem on-task at all.	☐ **Actively Reference a Written Agenda** – that has clear time estimates and outcomes. ☐ **Post the triggering question or task** and keep repeating it. ☐ **Redirect** – "We've strayed from the topic which was …" ☐ **Break the task down** – "Perhaps we're biting off too much. Let's tackle just this aspect of it." ☐ **Get the elephant on the table** – "We're really having trouble sticking to this point. Is there something about it that makes it difficult to address?" Other ideas: ☐
Feuding Members – Some group conflicts are related to differences around the task at hand. Others arise from differences in styles, personalities, or histories. Some tensions predate the team, and in all likelihood will outlast it, too.	☐ **Address task-related conflict** - not personal. ☐ **Model comfort with conflict** - Diversity of opinions leads to creative solutions. ☐ **Discover tensions ahead** – Before facilitating a meeting or starting a team, research the topic and the cast of characters to identify and plan for likely tensions. ☐ **Plan a conducive seating chart** so that feuding members are not seated confrontationally (across from each other). ☐ **Increase meeting structure** – For example, when considering the pros and cons of an issue, call for all the pros before moving to the cons. Ping-ponging back and forth will escalate quickly rather than allowing each view to be heard. Likewise, call on members so that feuding members are not ping-ponging but separated by other perspectives. ☐ **Get proposals on the table, clarify, explain rationale, consensus check.** ☐ **Avoid confrontational language** – "Are there any other perspectives that we haven't heard yet?" "Who has a different rationale?" rather than "Who has a different argument?" or "Let's debate this a bit." ☐ Other ideas: ☐