

Dealing with Aggressive Group Members

(taken from *Making Small Groups Work* by Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend)

Imagine for a moment that you are being invited to sign up for a group and the leader is telling you all the benefits you can expect: growth, togetherness, community, learning, wisdom, fun, spiritual development, and the like. Joining the group sounds good, you just can't wait for it to start. All those things are what you have been seeking for so long. You say, "Yes, for sure."

Now imagine that the leader also says, "you can expect to get those benefits in very small doses, because there is going to be one person who is really aggressive and pushy. He asserts his opinions all the time and tends to run over people and control the group process. And since I am a really nice group leader, I don't want to make waves. So I won't be saying anything to stop that, and you will have to try really hard to work around it and find some crumbs of that growth I talked about. It will be great. Look forward to seeing you. Bring the donuts."

Do you think you might feel different as you look forward to the group? Of course you do. But aggressive members are the reality for a lot of groups. Leaders don't warn you, but it happens. The well-intentioned group leader lets the pushy person ruin much of the group experience for everyone else. And the members feel disillusioned meeting after meeting, slowly losing interest in the group itself.

We would like you to take a proactive stance toward this problem before it begins. See yourself as the guardian of the process. You are the advocate for the group members, and if they are suffering under the pushy person's control, they need you to protect the group purpose.

Chooses Appropriate Interventions

Make sure you use the level of intervention appropriate for the group. The least level is directing traffic, and the deepest is the full-blown processing of the issue in the group. Your intervention depends on the group's purpose, agreements, expectations, and openness.

Be Direct But Not Disruptive

Use your gut to know how others are feeling. If it is bothering you, let that be a sign that others might feel the same way. Don't sit and suffer too long, because you are probably losing people. However, make sure that you are balanced in this issue, too. If it is your pet peeve, you may need to seek balance. If needed, talk to someone about what you are doing.

The least disruptive, least intrusive intervention is to take control directly, but without making process comments or confrontation. Again, the appropriateness of the group purpose and the ground rules enter in. If you are not confronting each other as part of the group, then just facilitate. You might say:

- "Hold on for a second, Joe. I want to hear the rest of what Susie was saying."
- "Thanks, Joe, but we haven't heard from some others yet. I want to make sure we hear from everyone in the group."
- "Hang on, Joe. I think that kind of advice might be past the ground rules that we set up. Why don't you just hold on to that?"

In other words, don't make an issue of what is happening. You are something like a policeman in the intersection of a traffic jam, making sure things keep flowing.

Confront Outside the Group

The next level would be confronting the aggressive person outside the group. Give Joe feedback in a way that does not become part of the group itself. If the group has not chosen process and feedback and Joe is becoming disruptive, take Joe aside. You might say:

- “Joe, I would like to make you aware of something. You have a lot of ideas and are very verbal, and I appreciate your wanting to contribute. I need for you to watch how much you say, however. Some of the other people are not getting a chance to talk. Could you be aware of that for me?”
- “Joe, I am concerned that you are giving some advice where people are not desiring it. We talked about this being a place where we would not do that, and you are doing it. I am afraid that it might make some people uncomfortable with sharing. So please hold off on that. Thanks.”
- “Joe, are you aware of the amount of input you give compared with the other members? I didn't think you were, just because you are a verbal person. Try to watch that and see if you can help me make the sharing tie more evenly divided. I want everyone to get a chance.”

Deal with it Within the Group

You can deal with the issue in the group, if that is part of the covenant (i.e. your group agreement). It would sound much like the above, but in the context of the meeting. You could ask others if they had noticed Joe's action and ask them to give Joe feedback. Also, you could have them talk about what it is like for them, what their experience is. Again, this has to be something the group has agreed to.

Remember that you are to model grace and truth and follow the rules for confrontation...and make sure that others do that as well.

No one likes to have a group dominated by someone. Remember, you are the leader, and it is your job to protect the group from that dynamic. You don't have to do it deeply, but you have to do it if things are going to work well. Get some support if needed, but keep order. Otherwise, you will lose people.