

## **Effective Risk Facilitation: Handling Difficult People**

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In addition to being able to flex their facilitation style to meet the varying challenges of the risk workshop and different risk identification techniques, the risk facilitator also needs to handle the people who participate in the risk workshop. Unfortunately, it is common to find at least some participants in every risk workshop who are not fully committed to its success, or who are not willing to contribute freely. There are seven types of workshop blockers, and risk facilitators need to know how to handle them appropriately.

- **Aggressive.** These people do not want to be in the workshop, think it is a waste of time, and actively oppose what the facilitator is trying to achieve. They are often loud, argumentative and critical, and their behaviour distracts others from contributing.
  - *Defuse.* Give them time to make their point, and do not argue with them, listen patiently, and use conciliatory language. If necessary speak to them outside the meeting during a break, asking for more tolerance, seeking their active support.
- **Complainer.** Everything is wrong for a complainer, from the room size or temperature to the meeting time and duration, the list of participants, the type of coffee and biscuits, the agenda and scope of the workshop, and so on.
  - *Delay.* Listen to their complaints, and acknowledge anything which is valid. Then agree to address concerns outside the meeting. Deal with immediate matters during a break, and take up other issues later.
- **Know-it-all.** Some people delight in expressing their opinion and demonstrating their expert knowledge of a topic, even when they are not real experts. They have strong opinions and voice them confidently. They are the first to answer every question, often dismissing the views of others as uninformed or naïve.
  - *Defer.* Recognise valid expertise, and play back their opinion so they know they have been heard and appreciated, then extend on their input if possible, building on it to regain the initiative.
- **Agreeable.** While agreeable individuals may appear to be the facilitator's friend, they often fail to share their true opinion for fear of upsetting someone or being criticised. They smile and nod encouragingly, but shy away from disagreeing with others, and are often reluctant to speak first in any debate.

- *Direct.* Beware of allowing them to get away with “being nice”, and challenge them to express their true opinions. Ask them to contribute first from time to time.
- **Negative.** These people will disagree on principle with others, seeing it as their role to give the opposing viewpoint (even if they don’t believe it). They undermine the facilitator and other participants by casting doubt on the truth or reliability of their inputs, and prevent consensus through constant nay-saying.
  - *Detach.* Maintain a degree of neutrality, not allowing them to get you on their side in criticising others. Accept valid alternative viewpoints, but aim for realistic compromise. Depersonalise their opposition, make it about the process or the principle but not about the person.
- **Staller.** For the staller, there is never enough information to make a firm judgement or to give a clear opinion. They wish to defer everything until later, when more data is available or more progress has been made.
  - *Delegate.* Explore reasons why they are reluctant to offer an opinion on the available data, find out exactly what additional information they require, and give them an action to bring it to the next meeting. Encourage them to give an interim assessment on the current data.
- **Silent.** Some people just refuse to contribute. They sit quietly but will not speak up to give their opinion, even when challenged or specifically invited to do so.
  - *Decline.* Refuse to accept non-participation or withdrawal. Ask direct open questions, then wait for an answer, using silence as a motivator. Speak to them privately to encourage participation.

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To provide feedback on this Briefing Note, or for more details on how to develop effective risk management, [contact the Risk Doctor \(info@risk-doctor.com\)](mailto:info@risk-doctor.com), or [visit the Risk Doctor website \(www.risk-doctor.com\)](http://www.risk-doctor.com).

## About the Author



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**Dr David Hillson** CMgr FRSA FIRM FCMI HonFAPM PMI-Fellow is The Risk Doctor ([www.risk-doctor.com](http://www.risk-doctor.com)). As an international risk consultant, David is recognised as a leading thinker and expert practitioner in risk management. He consults, writes and speaks widely on the topic and he has made several innovative contributions to the field. David's motto is "Understand profoundly so you can explain simply", ensuring that his work represents both sound thinking and practical application.

David Hillson has over 25 years' experience in risk consulting and he has worked in more than 40 countries, providing support to clients in every major industry sector, including construction, mining, telecommunications, pharmaceutical, financial services, transport, fast-moving consumer goods, energy, IT, defence and government. David's input includes strategic direction to organisations facing major risk challenges, as well as tactical advice on achieving value and competitive advantage from effectively managing risk.

David's contributions to the risk discipline over many years have been recognised by a range of awards, including "Risk Personality of the Year" in 2010-11. He received both the PMI Fellow award and the PMI Distinguished Contribution Award from the Project Management Institute (PMI®) for his work in developing risk management. He is also an Honorary Fellow of the UK Association for Project Management (APM), where he has actively led risk developments for nearly 20 years. David Hillson is an active Fellow of the Institute of Risk Management (IRM), and he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) to contribute to its Risk Commission. He is also a Chartered Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) and a Member of the Institute of Directors (IOD).

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