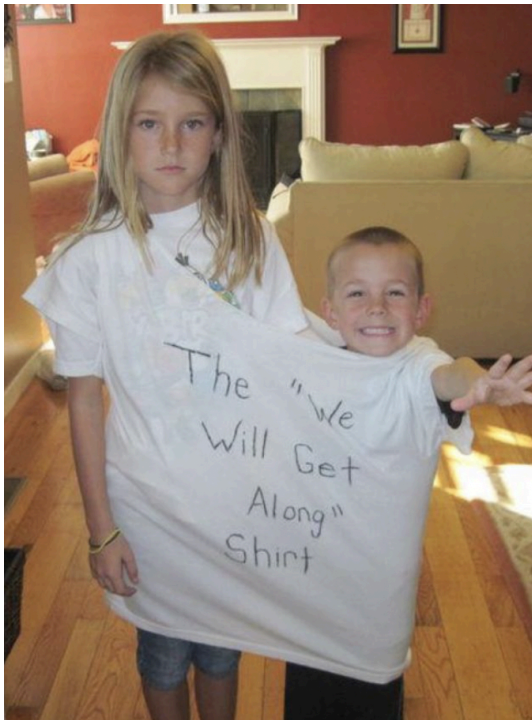


# Five Ways To Rescue Groups Gone Bad

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You're in a meeting, workshop or public forum. You may be the person facilitating the gathering.

All of a sudden, for reasons you may or may not have anticipated, things go pear-shaped. People start going off-topic, attacking others or getting upset about a niche issue that's only vaguely connected to the one on the table for discussion.

The temperature rises, the feeling of conflict ratchets up a notch (or few) and that horrible sense of discomfort threatens to undo whatever has been achieved thus far.

What can you do to get things back on course?

One action you can take to keep a group 'on task' is to set some ground rules at the very beginning of the session. This is best done by asking the group for *their* suggestions (ie. their rules) as to what is acceptable process, and to decide what will happen if a participant does not want to comply with the ground rules.

For example, the group might agree that personal attacks will not be tolerated.

Write them up on a board or butcher's paper where everyone can see them, if possible. If there is any breach of these conditions of participation, the facilitator or other members of the group can then point to the agreed rules.

This approach is also more likely to prevent the facilitator from becoming a target – because the rules were decided by the group, not imposed by the facilitator.

## **1. Lower the heat**

Nothing helpful is going to happen while people's defences are raised or they are in attack mode. Their adrenals are fired up and they are in 'fight' mode. Others will go into 'flight' mode, withdrawing from a hostile situation either through non-participation, or physically leaving.

Allow a group, or factions within it, to vent about the situation. Right at the start of the session, let them get it off their chests – they won't be taking anything else in while they are silently aggravated anyway. Then ask the group if they are willing to put that in a metaphorical jar on a shelf just for the time being, while the group works towards the outcome sought.

Be aware of which ego states various people in the room might have moved into (and of your own state), and use [nonviolent communication](#) techniques to guide your verbal and non-verbal responses:

*Nonviolent Communication holds that most conflicts between individuals or groups arise from miscommunication about their human needs, due to coercive or manipulative language that aims to induce fear, guilt, shame, etc.*

*These 'violent' modes of communication, when used during a conflict, divert the attention of the participants away from clarifying their needs, their feelings, their perceptions, and their requests, thus perpetuating the conflict.*

In his *Ministry of Food* and *Food Revolution* TV series, Jamie Oliver encounters a number of these situations – it is worth studying how he worked to get groups hostile to each other, and to him, on the same page.

## **2. Ask participants to ‘play the ball’, not the player**

Nothing raises someone’s hackles or puts them in a defensive position like feeling they are being personally attacked for an idea or point of view they are offering.

Ask people to proceed as participants in a conversation, rather than opponents in a debate. Remind them that everyone is there to deal with the common issue of concern, not to attack others.

If you are in the firing line, be prepared and know what you can do to help you survive personal attacks. Setting some ground rules at the beginning of the session about refraining from ad hominem tactics is preferable, rather than trying to manage them without the group’s agreement that this is not acceptable.

## **3. Reframe participants’ view of the issue from negative to positive**

A discussion can quickly end up on the downward spiral if the focus is constantly on what is wrong, or what problem needs to be fixed, how it’s so-and-so’s fault, and that it’s such a mess it might never be resolved.

Yet if people are not given the opportunity to speak, or more importantly, to be heard, it is likely to fuel frustration and anger that derails the group.

Demonstrating that you are listening by reiterating back to various speakers what has been said shows that you, and the rest of the group, have heard them. Active listening builds trust.

Using an ‘assets-based’ approach allows a group to focus on what is already working – focusing on positives and strengths, building on what communities already have – and how more of this can be achieved.

In situations where the engagement is expected to be ongoing, or the issues are very sensitive and/or complex, it may take up a whole session (or more) for people to air their concerns before moving onto the task at hand. It is likely that a lot of trust-building needs to take place, and that requires building personal relationships which takes time.

Watch out for 'black hats' and ensure they do not take over or scuttle proceedings.

#### **4. Shift the focus to the present, and the common concern**

While it is true that past events have shaped the current situation, allowing a conversation or group to keep going over the past can bog down the discussion and prevent a group from making headway about a common concern (which is why they're there, right?).

Instead, mutualise concerns about the issue – get the group to think about what they have in common, rather than what makes them different.

Suggesting that the parties combine against the problem is a way to get a group thinking about what to do now, rather than engaging in blame games about the past.

It's important to acknowledge that where there may not be common ground, it's OK to agree to disagree. In addition, there may be several groups with a common purpose different from the other groups.

Be aware that there may be a number of agendas in the room, that each may need to be dealt with one at a time, and that this process could involve others through their provision of support and/or constructive criticism.

#### **5. Shift the idea from a positional claim to an expression of need**

People making claims and then defending positions are less likely to be open to differing viewpoints, and very likely to get others who don't share their perspective offside.

Asking participants to instead express a need reframes the dynamic from 'here's what I want' to 'who can help me?' Think about how you feel when you hear someone asking for help, rather than someone making demands. People are honoured to be asked for advice or assistance.

If you're a participant in a session that's gone off the rails, do what you can to help the facilitator get the discussion back on track. The risk of your 'treading on their toes' is probably far outweighed by their gratitude that someone else is backing up their efforts.

None of these steps are a foolproof panacea for facilitating groups, but they are some of the most effective tools for giving yourself the best chance of a positive outcome when things go awry.

Finally, accept that some days, despite your best efforts, the group is just going to 'go bad' and will be beyond rescue – and that's just how it is.

*Many thanks to my good friend Maria Fantasia, who has extensive experience in community and stakeholder engagement, for her input; and to [Margaret Dugdale](#), whose [Planning With Communities](#) course I have attended, which informed this post.*