

EXPERT GUIDANCE ON CRITICAL COACHING ISSUES

“How can I ensure group sessions are fair to all?”



the situation

“I conduct group coaching sessions over the phone with several different groups. Invariably in almost every group I coach, one client monopolizes the conversation, wants the entire session to deal with his or her specific issues, and barely lets anyone else get a word in. How can I ensure that everyone is “heard” in group coaching sessions?”

the experts weigh in

By Victoria Trabosh, CDC®

Managing any group well, whether by phone or in person, can feel like one of two analogies:

1. Conducting a rich, full-bodied orchestra where all members play their part.
2. Taking your puppy to dog obedience school.

I surmise that you’re not feeling very conductor-like. So I’d like to further explore the agony and ecstasy of dog obedience training and how it relates to you and managing someone who monopolizes the call. How a perfect stranger (the trainer) turned my squirming ball of fluff and fur into a well-behaved puppy after 20 seconds never ceased to amaze me when we were in class. I realized after the first class that I was the one learning obedience, not my pup.

The dog trainer made it perfectly clear that our puppies’ problems were not theirs, but ours! We were not the alpha dog, the leader. Our pup had become the alpha dog. If you’ve ever seen a puppy misbehave consistently and repeatedly for certain members of a family (the pack) but turn into perfectly trained animals for one person (the alpha dog), you know how this works. In groups, the leader’s ability to be the alpha dog is evident early on. The leader should never waver and turn the role over to anyone in the group.

Stating standards of communication behavior at the beginning of any group is important. The part all leaders who work well with a group know is that your boundaries

must match your standards. Here are three commands used in dog obedience class that relate to you as the leader:

Command #1: SIT! You begin by having clear written standards to follow. Having these in writing and outlining them in a short discussion at the beginning of the call is paramount to success. When standards are broken they – not the person – become the focus. Focusing on the standards is ideal to keep tension at a minimum. Tension affects the energy of the entire group – but refocusing to the standard (maintaining the boundary) just becomes part of the call.

Command #2: STAY! Practically speaking, standards of communication behavior clearly state that time is limited and all members are expected to participate – but not excessively. If anyone does monopolize, remind them that time is limited and others need to participate as well, effectively but clearly restating the standard. If everyone has agreed to the original standards, this will usually bring the person around to participate more effectively. If the behavior continues, have a conversation off-line to ensure this person’s needs will appropriately be met in a group coaching situation.

Command #3: HEEL! And finally, all great dog obedience classes share a common quality: they’re fun! Don’t become legalistic about this – but BE the alpha dog. And all the pups will know it.

Are you grappling with a sticky situation?

You don’t have to go it alone. Let our senior coaches give you some different perspectives to consider. Email your situation to: editor@choice-online.com and put “sticky situations” in the subject line.

By Craig Carr, PCC, CPCC

I'd like to address this situation by pointing back to basics. A common analogy is that if one-to-one work is like throwing a ball up in the air and catching it, group work is like juggling three or more balls at ever-increasing levels of complexity! And here's a metaphor: If you've ever practiced a martial art like aikido, or played a position in a team sport, you know that the highest skill is not technique but the ability to be aware of the energy that is moving and changing around you all the time. Group coaching is like that.

Let's also appreciate that the decision to add groups to your coaching practice is more than a practical one. It takes training and supervision to do it well and it's not for everybody. The behavior you mention is only the tip of the iceberg of potentially frustrating episodes.

Back in the last century (Gerald Ford was president!) I took a social psychology course in college that was based on the emerging field of group dynamics. It was an hour each week where we basically sat in a circle and looked at each other and waited for something to happen, and another hour where we debriefed and discussed what did – or didn't – occur. It was amazing because it taught me three memorable lessons that relate to your question.

The first is that there is a phase, let's call it "Challenge the Leader," that occurs less and less frequently depending on how well the leader handles it the first time it shows up. It must occur if the group is to be classified as healthy and functional. If you don't like the idea of your leadership being challenged, find another line of work.

The second is that if the group handles a wayward participant and does the job of bringing them back to focus, the leader is actually granted more esteem and allowed to take the group into riskier territory. You, the leader, have granted the members permission to solve their own problem (sounds like coaching!).

The third is that the leader must model curiosity and comfort with a quiet space. Many people talk to fill a vacuum they subconsciously deem as awkward. Train your group that people process at different rates and with various internal/external reference points such as hearing themselves talk or non-verbal feedback. Once you give a rationale for asking someone to pause and be curious, you may find you actually have to call on that person as they may respond by withdrawing their energy.

As I said, a group leader keeps many balls in the air. Enjoy it or avoid it. If you do it only because you can leverage more time for dollars you are setting yourself up for disappointment.

By Carol Adrienne, PhD

This situation can make or break your group, so it's imperative to prepare ahead. I've facilitated groups both in person and on the phone with monopolizers. One such type is the Talker – who launches into long-winded scenarios. Another is the person who offers too much, sometimes uncomfortable, personal information – the TMI. Then there is the Interrogator – one who is openly confrontational, skeptical or argumentative. And of course, the Victim – one who readily shares oft-told tales of woe, and in extreme cases, breaks into sobs or tears up.

The cardinal rule in any coaching group is that people must feel safe and they want to feel heard. I recommend the following techniques.

SET GUIDELINES UP FRONT. For example, "We will try to get to as many of your questions as we can in this one-hour session. Since we don't have the advantage of eye contact on the phone, I'd like to remind everyone of a few simple guidelines. State your name, so we know who you are. Keep your question or concern short and to the point. Talk from your heart and from your own experience. And please try to avoid the temptation to give advice."

SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR THE HOUR. "In the best of all worlds, we would each have unlimited time to talk. However, realistically, given our one-hour time frame, we probably have room to address three or four people's situations today."

BE A LIGHTEARTED HEAVY. "Part of my job is to watch the clock. I know a lot of feelings or thoughts might come spilling out. Don't be upset if, at some point, I jump in to summarize. We want to give as many people as possible a chance to participate. Is that okay with everyone? Great, so who will our first three people be?" (Make a list, so they know when their turn will be.) "If you don't get a chance to share today, you'll be a priority in the next session."

INTERVENTIONS. Effective facilitating depends on sensitivity to when the Talker, TMI or Victim types start to lock up the energy and lose the audience. If you have set prior guidelines, interrupting when necessary will not appear as abrupt or arbitrary. Gently interrupt: "Mary, can you hold on just a minute? Thanks. Can I summarize your main points so far?" Summarize to show you heard what she said. Take back the floor by making a few comments. Open the space and reconnect to the group. Invite comments. Keep it "present and personal." With an Interrogator, you might need to bring into the open what is bothering him/her. Acknowledge his/her feelings or opinions without necessarily agreeing with them. Attempt to reconnect them to the present moment: "Roger, is there anything you need from this group right now?" It may be that the disruptive person is getting stuck in their old story or something has triggered feelings of anger. However, sometimes the person's abrasiveness instigates unexpectedly brilliant group dynamics and insights. Trust your intuition! ●