

Managing Dominating Small Group Members

At some point, you have participated in a small group where one person clearly dominates the discussion. That person may have even been you. While folks who tend to dominate meetings are usually smart and passionate, their domination often negatively impacts the group. It squelches other perspectives needed. It reduces the level of commitment from others. It leads to frustration and negative feelings. So how do you respond?

Before small group:

1. **Set Ground Rules:** A simple ground rule is that "Everyone participates: Share the Floor". This sets up an expectation that you want to balance participation. Occasionally enforce this ground rule during your small group.
2. **Understand the Source:** Do they have an inflated sense of self-importance? Do they just like to hear themselves talk? Are they oblivious? Are they trying to control things? Knowing this helps you respond.

During small group:

3. **Listen:** Oftentimes when people dominate, it's because they don't feel heard. After they speak, quickly summarize what you hear. Another way to show you hear what they are saying is to write down a quick summary of their input on poster paper.
4. **Every Member Prepare Their Response:** Utilize the material by posing the question, have everyone write down their response and then ask a specific person respond with their answer they wrote down. That way every member has a response ready. This is a productive time and allows students to become comfortable with silence.
5. **Ask for Input from Others:** By asking something for input from others you create a space for others to participate. Examples include:
"Do other people have an opinion on this?" / "Who haven't we heard from?" / "Does anyone have an alternative view?" / "(insert student name), you have not said anything yet, what do you think?" / "I would appreciate hearing another point of view." / "I know that you have are eager to share your answer, but we need to get everyone involved in the discussion." / "Let's see if anyone else has something to add and then I will come back to you."
6. **Don't use negative language:** Though it may be tempting, don't say, "Shut up, you've been talking too much". Be polite when you choose to intervene.

7. **Check-in After:** Approach the person privately and give them feedback in a way that encourages them to listen more during small group.

8. **Evaluate the Discussion:** As a group, take some time to evaluate your discussion and mention this issue if you feel it is of concern.

9. **Be Assertive:** The best way to handle a dominant personality is assertiveness on the part of the leader. Prior to a discussion or prior to asking a question, tell the group that you are looking for brief answers and thoughts. Also, make it known that you want to hear from as many people as possible on each subject. Look for a quick breath, no matter how short, to jump in and allow others to contribute.

10. **Manage Eye Contact:** Dominant personalities often associate eye contact from the discussion leader as a green light to talk. They may even interpret it as a request from you to share what's on their minds. Therefore, minimizing eye contact is an effective method for handling group members who talk too much. To accomplish this without offending the person, invite him or her to sit next to you before the discussion begins. This will decrease the number of times you make direct eye contact with the person, which should also decrease his or her need to talk.

11: **Manage the Group's Silence:** Many people are uncomfortable with silence, and members who seem to jump in and answer every question may be doing so in an attempt to break the silence and end their discomfort. Therefore, by helping them get used to silence as a normal part of group life, you may decrease their need to talk over time. One way to accomplish this is to ask group members to wait a specific amount of time before responding to a question. Say something like, "People need different amounts of time to process a discussion question and organize their thoughts for a response. To make sure that everyone gets a chance to fully engage with our discussion, I'd like everyone to wait 10 seconds after I ask a question before jumping in."

Managing a small group member that is dominating discussion is challenging, but it is worth facing to promote healthy small group conversation.