

Burning Questions

by Robert W. Pike, CSP

How do you deal with the participant from hell who doesn't want to be in the training program, is totally negative about anything and everything you say, spreads his negativity to the other participants and, based on circumstances, cannot be asked to leave?

This almost sounds like a "Can you top this problem?" type of question.

1. Make sure that prerequisites are established for the course so that people are there for the right reasons . . . and with the right skills/experience to benefit.
2. Start the course in one of several ways:

Ask participants to brainstorm 18 reasons they shouldn't be there. Have them do this in small groups. Most people won't have 18. They'll have one or two. People try to do what you ask, so they start coming up with some crazy and funny things. This generates laughter, which releases endorphins to the brain and, in turn, lightens the mood of the class. I post all the reasons on chart paper so that people can see them throughout the class. Most of the reasons I can't do anything about, and I acknowledge that. Some I can, and I commit to what I'll do and by when. Then I ask them each to meet me halfway in making this time together worthwhile.

When an entire class has committed to this, it makes it hard for that one super-negative person to continue that behavior.

- a. I split the class into groups of five to seven people and have each group be either an, I (for Instructor) or P (for Participant). I ask them to think of all the things past instructors or participants have done that have gotten in the way of their learning. When this is finished, we post the lists. I make a commitment that I will do my best to avoid the negative instructor behaviours, and I ask if it would be fair enough that they commit to one another that they will avoid the negative participant behaviours.

Again, this puts the super-negative person on notice that negative behavior is not acceptable to the peers in the program.

This is important because most people want the acceptance of their peers, even if they don't care about the instructor.

There are several other things I would need to know to give a more specific series of suggestions:

1. Why is it that they don't want to be there? Do they think they already know it? Is their boss forcing them? Do they have high-pressure project deadlines that they perceive to be more important? Are there others in the class that they don't like? Do they feel they should be teaching the class?

Any and all of these things might dictate slightly different approaches.

2. Why can't they be asked to leave? Is it a required course? I had one participant that exhibited all of the things you've suggested in your question. The class had brainstormed the 18 reasons and he would not even contribute. When we divided up into small groups he wouldn't participate. He literally read the paper while his group tried to accomplish things. The entire class was about ready to tar and feather him.

I tried talking to him offline. I tried changing his group. I tried giving him a chance to share his expertise (he did have some experience in the area). He said he had nothing to say.

Finally, at lunch the first day, I said it was obvious he did not want to be there and that his continued presence was not providing value for either the group or him. I said I didn't have the authority to allow him to leave and asked who I needed to talk to to arrange that. He looked over his shoulder and pointed to a woman and said, "Talk to her." She had overheard the conversation and was his boss. She simply said that he could take his things and leave and go back to his department and that she would deal with him later. She apologized and everyone in the class was relieved when he did not return after lunch.

In another case I was told that under no circumstances could the person leave. I set up a table for him in the back of the room and he sat there for two days reading and writing. This fulfilled the requirement that he be in the room (which was all they cared about) and minimized the impact on other participants.

I always try to keep two guiding principles in mind as I face these situations. First, if possible, I want to get the person on board so that they can benefit. Second, if that won't work, I want to minimize the person's impact on other participants.

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