

## How to resolve conflicts in meetings

Even when facilitators set ground rules, meet all of their responsibilities, and create opportunities for meaningful participation, conflicts will sometimes arise. Conflicts are an inevitable part of working with others and it is the facilitator's job to handle them adeptly.

### How to use case studies

When introducing different scenarios in meetings or trainings, you can lead everyone to discuss the first one or two cases, and break the participants into several small groups and discuss the rest. For each case study, participants need to pay attention to what the concrete measures and lessons are. We must also remember to think about what to do before and after the scenario. At the end of this chapter, there are some tools to describe how to work long-term to avoid such scenarios as much as possible, as well as how to strategically respond to these situations as they occur.

### The “Low-to-high level intervention” method

The approach that we recommend you use when handling conflicts is called the “low-to-high level intervention” method. This method says that when a problem arises, you should start with the least threatening intervention first, before moving on to more serious interventions.

We see this, for example, in parenting. When young children do not listen to their parents, the first response of parents is usually to comfort, talk, and pacify them, before resorting to a more serious punishment such as

scolding. In even more serious situations, parents may escalate the intervention, choosing to ground the child or even adopting corporal punishment (we do not recommend this, of course).

Another way to think about this is a staircase. Low-level interventions are at the bottom of the stairs and should therefore come before mid-level interventions halfway up, with high-level interventions at the top. In the coming section, we will explain this method with a few examples.

## Scenario One: Sidebar conversations

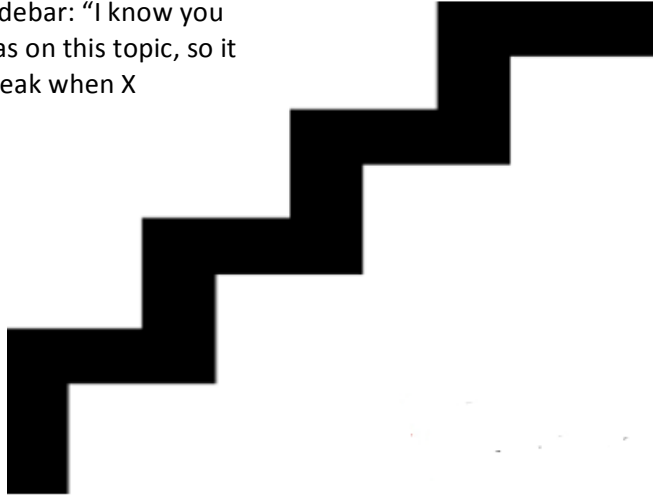
**High-level Intervention:** if one person has done this multiple times, then have a one-on-one talk with him or her during break. If many people are having sidebar conversations, then ask “does everyone need to take a little break?”

**Middle-level Intervention:**

To those having the sidebar: “I know you have questions or ideas on this topic, so it will be your turn to speak when X finishes.”

**Low-level Intervention:**

To everyone: “please note that we have agreed on the ground rules that we will only have one discussion at a time.” Alternatively, give a hint through eye-contact suggesting “one conversation at a time.”



## Scenario Two: Off-topic conversations

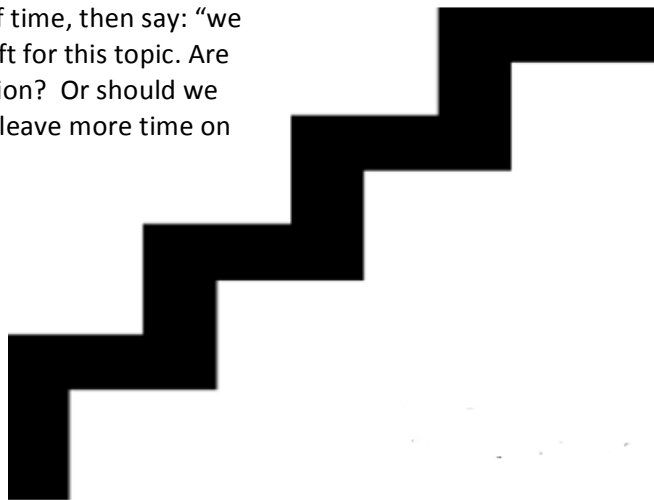
**High-level Intervention:** if there are only 30 minutes left, but the to-do list is very long, then interrupt the conversation and say: “we only have 30 minutes left. Should we move some topics to the next discussion?”

**Middle-level Intervention:**

if you are running out of time, then say: “we only have 10 minutes left for this topic. Are we ready to make decision? Or should we change the agenda and leave more time on this topic?”

**Low-level Intervention:**

point to the ground rule “stick to the meeting agenda”; suggest they can talk in the free time; or, tell everyone: “we are now discussing item 4 in the agenda. Let’s discuss 5 when we finish this one.”

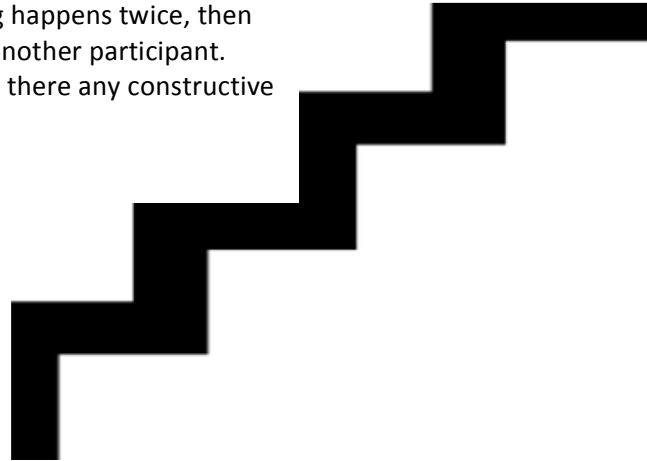


### *Scenario Three: Personal attacks*

**High-level Intervention:** if the same thing happens three times, then have a break. Ask for a one-on-one talk with the person at fault and tell him or her that bringing in personal emotions to meetings is not appropriate, that he or she needs to focus on meeting goals and that dropping out of the meeting or not is his or her choice, but no matter what, he or she cannot attack other people.

**Middle-level Intervention:** if the same thing happens twice, then say: “X, this is not your first time attacking another participant. Our ground rules require mutual respect. Is there any constructive opinion you wish to share on this?”

**Low-level Intervention:** after the first occurrence, say: “in the ground rules we have mentioned ‘respect each other’” and reiterate ground rules. Alternatively, say: “let’s set aside personal views and focus on raising constructive suggestions.”

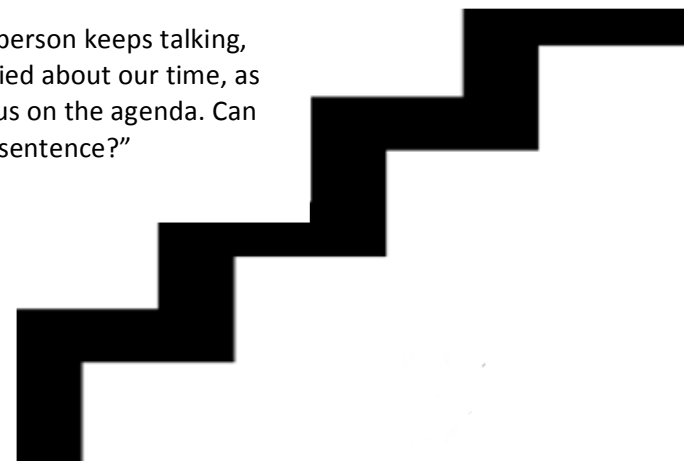


### *Scenario Four: People are talking for too long, regardless of whether people are listening*

**High-level Intervention:** if this person does this repeatedly, then have a one-on-one talk with him or her during the break. Let the person realize that his or her behavior has affected progress towards the meeting’s goals. Ask the person to cooperate and make sure the meeting goes as planned.

**Middle-level Intervention:** if this person keeps talking, you can say: “I am a little bit worried about our time, as there are more items waiting for us on the agenda. Can you summarize your point in one sentence?”

**Low-level Intervention:** say: “I am sorry to interrupt, but I am not sure how this relates to our topic. Can you be more specific?”



*Scenario Five : Some people are used to speaking a lot in meetings, for example, older men, while some others are hesitant to speak, for example, young women. What should you do?*

Please think for a few minutes and write down your thoughts. Categorize your ideas into low, middle and high degree interventions. At the end of this chapter, we have provided sample measures to cope with this situation.

### **Low-to-high Intervention**

Facilitators need to choose intervention tactics carefully according to the audiences; for example, if you are facilitating workshops with participants from transgender communities, then make sure your intervention is trans-sensitive and not offensive to trans people. If the group is quite new and people don't know each other very well, then facilitators should start from the intervention that people are comfortable with. The facilitators also need to assess the situation that need to be intervened: whether it needs immediate intervention or not; for instance, if two people engage into a physical fight at workshop, then facilitators need to stop the fight regardless of the degree of the intervention. In a word, the facilitators should use low-to-high interventional where possible, and more importantly, adjust the intervention methods based on the participants' situation, groups' dynamics and each incident.