

Managing Naysayers in Meetings **©copyright by Robert (Bob) W. Lucas**

We all know them. People in a meeting who, no matter what suggestion or idea someone comes up with, offer a “yes *but*” or other negative comment. My personal belief is that what this type of person does is a direct result of learned behavior from caregivers as children. Likely, their role models were poor communicators who failed to give positive feedback or reinforcement to these people. As a result, these people can put out any creative flame that might flicker unless they are dealt with appropriately and quickly.

Typically, *naysayers* will use phrases such as:

- *We tried that before and it did not work.*
- *That will never work around here.*
- *They will never let us do that.*
- *We don't have time or resources to do...*
- *Sounds good in theory, but it won't work here.*
- *That will never work in the real world.*
- *Upper management (supervisors) will not support that.*
- *Policy (law/regulations) prevents us from...*

Here are two suggestions to consider when you run into one of these people in your next staff meeting:

Try to determine their logic

Ask for the person's reasoning of why an idea will not work then put the topic out to the group for their input or feedback on what the Naysayer said. Ask, “*What do the rest of you think about what ___ just said?*” Be careful and prepared for what you will do if they agree with the Naysayer. Sometimes, there are real unspoken issues that you are not made aware of that prevent application of concepts suggested. If there are important issues surfaced you may want to either capture them for later discussion or to give to management (assuming the group agrees to the latter). The other option is to take a diversion from planned topics and discuss the new issue, if time permits, then brainstorm possible courses of action for a short period of time. Otherwise, group members may be distracted by the issue and you will end up with a lot of side conversations about it.

Assuming that others do not agree with the Naysayer, they will likely wear the person down and cause him or her to realize that others do not agree with opinions or ideas offered. Peer pressure is a powerful tool for quieting dissention.

Give Them the Benefit of Doubt

Assume that the negative person may have a good point and then ask the person, “*What alternate ideas do you have?*” or “*What do you suggest instead?*” Often they will not have given any real thought to the issue and cannot think of another option. If that is the case, suggest that the group discuss the original idea presented further and that if the Naysayer thinks of something later that you are willing to consider it. On the other hand, if the Naysayer does have an alternate suggestion, listen to it, then discuss the merits as a group or take other action deemed appropriate.

Whatever course of action that you decide to take, it is crucial that you allow the naysayer to maintain self-esteem and esteem in the eyes of others. If you offend or put the person down for speaking up, you may cause him or her to retaliate in other ways (e.g. lack of cooperation in the future, behind the scenes scheming with others who sympathize with him or her, or resignation from his or her job). You could also send a message that ideas or suggestions are not welcome or accepted and you could stifle future comments from others.

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