

Ask the Genie!

Dear Genie,

I'm a project manager leading an important project in my division. I'm constantly leading meetings, and the biggest problem I'm having is that my project sponsor is dominating my meetings! It's hard enough dealing with a dominator, but what do you do when it's a senior level sponsor??? Because he represents hierarchy, he's intimidating the entire group. What do I do???

Philip in Sacramento

Dear Philip,

This is a tricky situation, but unfortunately not a unique one. Sometimes the problem is getting the sponsor to show up for meetings as requested. On the other hand, sometimes we're sorry they did show because they become our "problem participants" and that can be difficult to manage. Try these meeting facilitation techniques:

- ❖ Meet with the sponsor prior to the meeting and specifically discuss what you need from them in the session. Possibly write out talking points for them – many will appreciate it if it's offered in the spirit of helping take one more thing off their plate (not telling them specifically what to say). Ask them to withhold their opinion until others have weighed in to avoid tainting others' input.
- ❖ If you sense others may be intimidated by the sponsor's opinion, suggest the group do a round robin and start at the opposite end of the table as the sponsor (so that their opinion comes near the end).
- ❖ Stand up! Whenever you stand when everyone else is seated, you immediately regain control of the group (temporarily). Thank the sponsor for their input (even note it visibly) and redirect the conversation as needed.
- ❖ Repeat their point and write it down – this may sound counterintuitive, but oftentimes a sponsor will get on their soap box (and not get off it) because they don't feel heard. When you repeat the point back to them and then write it down for all to see (on a flip chart or whiteboard), it reassures them that they have indeed been heard and immediately communicates an appreciation for their point.
- ❖ Ask for solutions – sometimes meeting participants (even sponsors) get caught in a cycle of whining and venting about problems. After agreeing with the issue (if appropriate or not offering an opinion if you don't agree), simply ask the sponsor to suggest a solution. Insist that the issue being raised is important enough to warrant devoting some energy to focusing on a solution.

If you have a question that you'd like to pose to the Meeting Genie, send it (along with your name and city) to askgenie@meetinggenie.com