Narrative

Moderating and Facilitating Groups: Responding to Difficult People and Situations

Overview

It's inevitable that you will encounter conflict during a creative workshop.

People are very good at having opinions.

"All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste. But it's like there is this gap. For the first couple years that you're making stuff, what you're making isn't so good. It's not that great. It's trying to be good, it has ambition to be good, but it's not that good.

But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is good enough that you can tell that what you're making is kind of a disappointment to you.

A lot of people never get past that phase. They quit."

Ira Glass

Overview

It's inevitable that you will encounter conflict during a creative workshop.

Creativity is subjective.

There are no real right answers to a design problem – but there are many wrong answers.

People struggle to communicate their creative feelings and opinions.

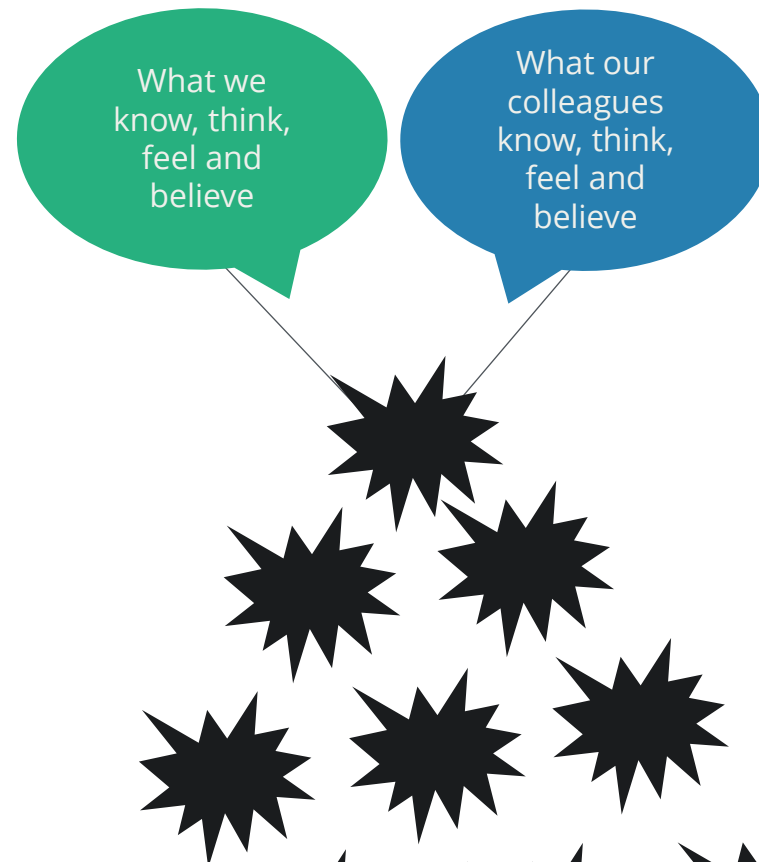We never really learn a rich vocabulary to discuss and analyze subjectivity.

Difficult situations and people

Creative conflict is not always bad, because the resolution of creative conflict leads to new ideas.
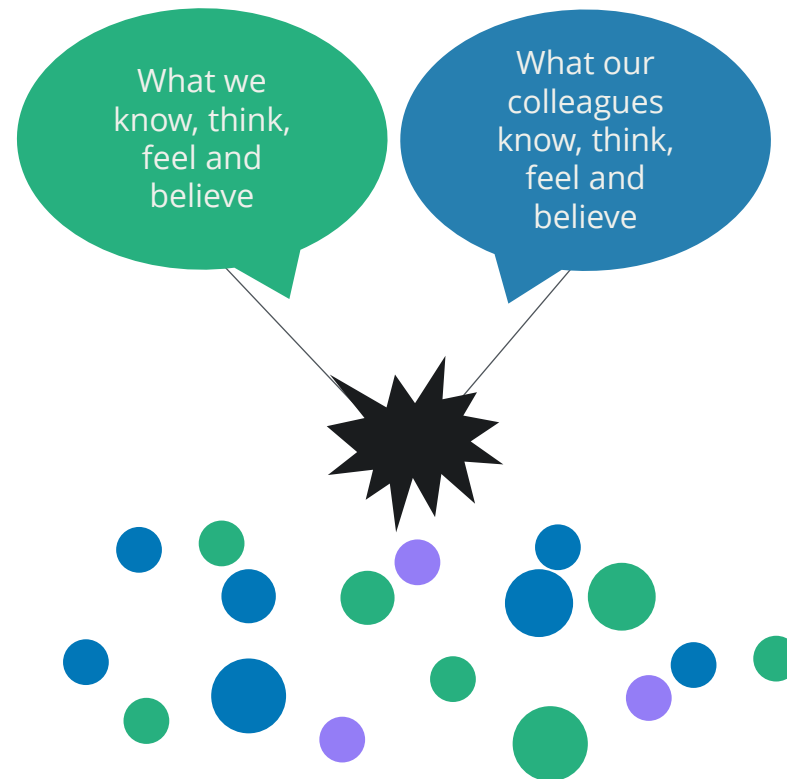
Difficult situations and people

# But eventually, creative conflict becomes unproductive.

Difficult situations and people

But eventually, creative conflict becomes unproductive.

The conversation becomes confrontational.

- Productive creative conflict focuses on ideas ("That idea..."). Confrontational creative conflict focuses on people ("You...").

- Mindsets become fixed. A fixed mindset is a wall, and logic, emotion, charisma and collaboration won't change it.

- Synthesis stops. The point of a creative conflict is to improve an idea, and that requires the combination of different concepts and thoughts. Unproductive creative conflict has no opportunity for synthesis.

What we know, think, feel and believe

What our colleagues know, think, feel and believe
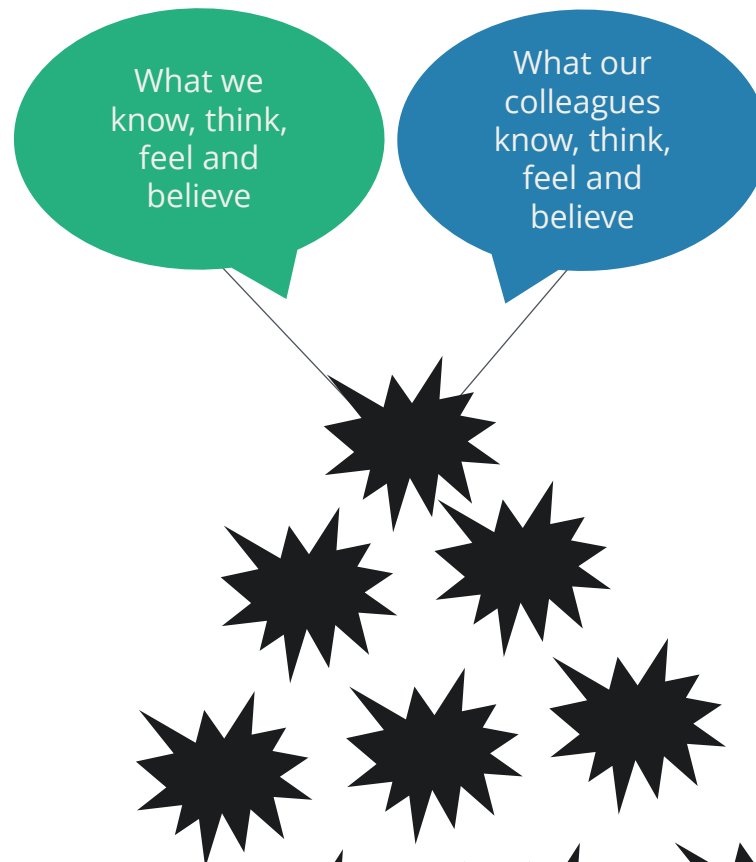
Difficult situations and people

There are common types of difficult situations you will encounter.

Participants who don't talk

One participant who won't stop talking

Participants who question the goal of the workshop

Participants who question the existence of the workshop

Attendees who won't participate

Participants who are overly negative

Narrative

Difficult situations and people

Participants don't talk.

✕	The workshop experience:

You ask questions and receive no answers.

It seems like participants aren't paying attention ("multitasking").

Participants look timid, scared or worried.

✓	Potential approaches:

Participants may be thinking. Often, *consideration* looks similar to *apathy*. Describe that you are going to give people some time, quietly, to think about the topic.

Participants may not see value in the workshop. Not all attendees are there because they want to be. Ask participants explicitly what they hope to achieve from the workshop, and revisit (and re-question) those goals if the group appears quiet.

Participants may be intimidated by someone in the group. In large companies, people often defer to those with bigger titles. Make the level disconnect obvious: "It's clear we have executives here. I want to make sure that everyone feels comfortable speaking."

Participants may need a nudge. If people aren't paying attention, calling them out – nicely – may be enough to bring them back. Ask them a question, by name: "Kate, I thought you might have an opinion?"

Difficult situations and people

One participant won't stop talking.

✕ The workshop experience:

One person vocalizes their opinion over and over.

One person speaks at length, filibustering the group.

✓ Potential approaches:

Some people are *external processors*. They need to talk things out in order to refine their thoughts and ideas. Give them room, but be clear that everyone needs to have a chance to talk by setting time-boxing rules.

Some people are unaware that they are being disruptive. Sometimes, simply asking a participant to give another person a chance to talk is enough to mitigate a talker; "Charles, given the amount of time we have, it would be useful to make sure everyone gets a chance to speak. Tisha, do you have anything you want to add?"

It may be necessary to back-channel to the person – or to their manager – to let them know they are being disruptive.

Difficult situations and people

Participants question the goal of the workshop.

<table>
<tr><td>❌</td><td>**The workshop experience:**</td><td>✓</td><td>**Potential approaches:**</td></tr>
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The workshop experience:

Participants ask to "take a step back" in order to "align on the purpose of the workshop."

Participants describe that timelines or project plans are misaligned with the workshop.

Potential approaches:

Workshop goals (and activities) are never set in stone. Pivot; ask the group to align on the workshop goals, write them down in real-time, and change the activities to better serve those goals.

Workshop goals may have emerged from other team members. If you are simply the facilitator, guide a conversation amongst the group to align on the intentions.

A team member may not have the background or context of the workshop. Walk backwards to describe how the goals of the workshop came to be.

Difficult situations and people

Participants question the *existence* of the workshop.

✕	The workshop experience:

Participants articulate that the workshop is a waste of time.

Participants' behavior or body language indicates that they don't see value in what they are doing.

✓	Potential approaches:

Some participants may need to be "individually tucked in" so they feel important. Take a short "bio break", pull them aside (in chat, or physically), and be direct: "It seems that you aren't finding a lot of value in this workshop. Is that right? How can we improve? Do you think it's important that you are here?"

Participants may not know why they are in the meeting. Sometimes, people are invited to meetings without context. Make sure that you provide background and a history, so new participants can better contextualize the materials.

Participants may not be familiar with a creative workshop. The nature of the meeting may be foreign to them. Take some time to explain the value of this form of meeting, as compare to any other type.

Difficult situations and people

Attendees refuse to participate.

✕	**The workshop experience:**

Participants say things like "I don't draw" or "I'm not very creative."

Participants are paying attention, but look grouchy and won't talk.

✓	**Potential approaches:**

People sometimes have fixed views of their skills and capabilities. They may view drawing or ideation as something that's OK for others, but not for them. Help them gain confidence in drawing by giving them tips and tricks to make their work look better, quickly.

When people don't see value in something, they may become quiet. Ask them – either publicly, or privately – if there is a problem with the structure of the workshop and if there are ways you can improve it or change it.

Difficult situations and people

Participants are overly negative.

✕	The workshop experience:

Participants say that things will never work.

Participants say that they've already tried these things.

Participants cut down other people's ideas and thoughts.

✓	Potential approaches:

Some people are just negative. Set rules up front that there are banned phrases, and then call people out when they break the rules.

People can feel threatened by things they don't understand. When you encounter negativity, it may be because they think their world or job may become disrupted. Make sure participants know that decisions made aren't set in stone.

Difficult situations and people

Most important to remember: you can only do so much.

Do what you can to mitigate the problems.

And then, roll with it.

Thank you!

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