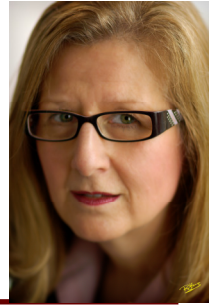




Using Questions to Deal with the Bully or the Dominator in the boardroom



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It is my belief that individuals who bully or dominate are in some kind of emotional pain. Their fear may stem from one of the following:

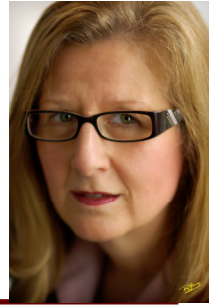
- Fear of failure
- Fear of not being heard
- Fear of not being in control
- Fear of being dominated
- Fear of rejection.

This does not mean that their behaviour is acceptable; it does mean that we have to consider how we deal with them while enabling the business at hand to continue. One way to reduce our dread of these individuals and remain in control of the session is to use questions.

Questions prevent us from responding in a manner which matches the tone of the incoming information. They put us back in the driver 's seat and enable us to keep our own emotions under control. They force us to think differently and our mouths aren 't open and we are not ready to pounce as soon as the other person finishes speaking. Questions enable us to slow down our cognitive processes and require the other person to slow their thoughts. They calm both persons.

Questions give us time to think about what we need to accomplish in the current circumstances and how we can assist the other person to engage constructively without derailing the efforts of the group. The last thing you want to do is to feel powerless dealing with a bully or a dominator. Questions level the playing field. They require the other person to think before he provides his answer. Also, this space provides time for you to determine where you can agree and, depending on the response, what you would need to know next. It is important to lead the person in a constructive direction and avoid pushing, shoving or belittling the person in any way.

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There are different types of questions. For example, the question “ Could you outline the risks you see associated with each of the suggestions on the table? ” acknowledges that a member ’ s opinion is valuable and it requires him to focus on the ideas of others as well as his own opinions. Sometimes individuals need to speak in order to think. This question requires him to open up. You never know but it is possible that he will convince himself that the group option is the better one. This person will know that you are being respectful and you are not agreeing to engage in a battle. As you listen, you may discover new points you hadn ’ t heard because of his demeanour and you may wish to put new thoughts to the group for consideration.

That question is very different from the following, “What is your point?” This question only requires the person to focus on his thoughts. He does not have to weigh other opinions. It isolates him from the group and keeps him stuck in his own way of thinking.

A third approach would be acknowledge his ideas and simultaneously determine how he would address the perceived flaws pointed out by the other members of the group. You could say, “We could do X, however, do you think it is wise for the board to take this course of action because if it does not succeed it would mean X,Y, and Z. How would we justify taking those risks?” This type of question acknowledges the points made by the group and at the same time provides time for the member to address the risks directly. When the item goes to a vote, he will know his voice was heard.

The type of question you ask will depend on your circumstances. The key is to ask questions that i) demonstrate respect for the person, ii) require the person to think, iii) give us quality information, and iv) assist the bully or the dominator to become a team player.