Chapter 8: Group encounters

Having considered increasingly difficult situations where one person is trying to reason with another it is time to move on to situations where more than one person is trying to do the influencing and, usually, there is competition. This does not necessarily require people to be together in one location or attend simultaneously.

Group encounters of this type include:

* Business meetings, committee meetings, and similar discussions.

* Political talk shows, interviews watched by an audience, public debates, and interactions between conference speakers and people with questions.

* Competitive sales situations.

* Court cases and other legal proceedings with advocates and decision-makers.

* Discussions on social media, especially of controversial subjects like politics and religion.

As with one-to-one encounters the level of cooperation is crucial. Occasionally, groups of three or more people are entirely cooperative. Occasionally, everyone except you is uncooperative. However, most often the situation is that some people are cooperative and some are not. The level of reliance on reason and fairness is also variable.

In group encounters all the recommendations for exchanges and for one-to-one encounters are applicable. The recommendations in the following Cases add to those recommendations.

Case 8: Having control of the discussion

Being the chairperson or otherwise being the person with most control of a discussion is an advantage but brings new challenges. The recommendations in this Case are relevant in later Cases whenever you have this role.

Examples of this role include being chairperson of a meeting or conference, moderator of an online discussion, owner of an online group (with the power to exclude people or delete comments), interviewer, or master of ceremonies.

The role gives some power to control the discussion but rarely full power. You may have influence over who attends or is in the online group, what information is provided (e.g. reports provided to a board of directors, items posted to start an

online discussion), the agenda (tasks on the list and time allocated), how the tasks are approached, which options are for consideration, who speaks and for how long, and what is voted on and when.

The following guidelines aim to:

- encourage a good quality discussion based on reason and fairness; and

- eliminate or reduce manipulative behaviour by participants.

Have a clear agenda

If there is an opportunity to write an agenda for a meeting or discussion then create one that clearly identifies the aims and allocation of time then distribute it in advance. This encourages strong contributors to prepare and should improve the contributions overall.

An ideal agenda makes clear the process for tackling each task, including key speakers.

Provide good information

You can often provide information in advance or during a discussion. Prefer information that is factual, detailed, but understandable. Provide it in advance and make it prominent at the start of the relevant discussion. This puts relevant facts into the discussion and encourages participants to be factual generally.

Clarify the discussion process

Meetings often drift inconclusively without procedural control. Explain the objectives and approach for each task and remind people where necessary. Occasionally clarify which options are under consideration.

Be flexible where a better approach is suggested but cut off useless digressions if you can.

Help people speak up

It is not necessary for everyone to contribute equally or even at all. Some people do not want to contribute. Some are much more able to contribute helpfully than others. Do not push everyone to contribute because it will elicit some poor contributions that waste time.

However, some valuable contributions do not get shared because others go on for too long or do not wait for responses. Intervene to stop this happening.

> E.g. Imagine that a jury is in deliberation. Most members think the defendant is guilty but one young woman is not sure and says so. Another jury member fires a question at her but before she can answer someone else jumps in with another question. Before she can respond to either question a third person fires yet another question. At this point the foreman intervenes saying 'Hold on, hold on. Give her a chance to answer. Now, the first question was about the witness's identification. Julie, would you like to say something about that? Take all the time

you need.' Someone else starts to speak before Julie can answer but the foreman raises his hand and gives a hard look that shuts them up. Julie is protected from further bullying and able to process the evidence properly.

Restrict tricks and abuses of power

This can be done by excluding people who consistently behave badly and by cutting them off or deleting their comments if (1) those contributions are manipulative, and (2) they are part of a clear pattern of persistently manipulative behaviour. Who is to decide which contributions are rational and fair and which are tricks or abuses of power? You. It is the role you have in the discussion.

Identifying manipulative trickery or abuse of power requires technical skill and is not usually difficult. Some bad behaviour by particular people is predictable. React to the most blatant examples rather than trying to catch everything. It can help to react to even trivial incidents, provided they are clear cut, because it reminds people to behave well.

E.g. Here is a snippet from a hypothetical business meeting:

Person 1: 'So why are you so obsessed with sales figures? Where is this fixation coming from?'

Chair: 'Sorry, but can I just stop you there. The words "obsessed" and "fixation" insinuate a mental health issue. Let's keep that kind of language and personal attacks out of this meeting. Just ask why sales figures are important or talk about the importance of other objectives.'

E.g. Here is another snippet:

Person 2: 'Professor Bennet makes several comments here which we can all read. They are quite complicated and technical statistical points.'

Person 3: 'Oh dear, I wonder if he has any friends! Ha ha.'

Chair: 'Hold on. Hold on. Mocking someone for having a lot of relevant technical knowledge is not helping our discussion. Professor Bennet may have some good points and we should try to understand them.'

These interventions on discussion techniques are completely different from weighing in with opinions and value judgements related to the content of the discussion, which are much more subject to bias:

E.g. Here is that hypothetical business meeting, again but with an unhelpful intervention:

Person 1: 'So why are you so obsessed with sales figures? Where is this fixation coming from?'

Chair: 'Sorry, but can I just stop you there. For goodness sake! Surely you know that making sales is fundamental to business.'

When considering excluding someone altogether, watch for a pattern of manipulative behaviour.

Continue to encourage reason and fairness

All the recommendations above have been to encourage reason and fairness but, in addition, mention the value of reason and fairness occasionally, praise good contributions, and reward those who make them with more time and protection from unfair attacks.

Case 9: All cooperative

This is the situation where the other influencers only want what is fair and are willing to use reason and fairness, even if they sometimes lapse. In addition to the challenges of influencing on your own, there is the problem of coordinating efforts.

In this comparatively easy Case, the following guidelines aim to:

* promote use of reason and fairness (as usual); and

* rely most on the best available brain power.

Encourage use of reason and fairness

Although all participants in this Case are cooperative, some may use tricks or other manipulative ploys (even though they do not need to). This undermines the quality of discussion and may reduce support for (1) correct reasoning on the same side of an argument, and (2) people on the same side.

If there is an opportunity then, to make lapses more obvious, describe concisely the conversation you would like. For example, you could say:

* 'I think this idea is worth exploring properly so I would like this discussion to focus on possible applications of it and try to find solutions to problems that might arise. After we've done that fully then perhaps we can consider if we want to take the idea any further.'

* 'This topic often triggers arguments and advocacy but I don't want that to happen to us. I'd much rather we discussed this carefully, objectively, and factually – considering the impacts on everyone involved, both positive and negative.'

* 'This is a tricky problem to solve so I'd like to hear from you all with your most relevant and reliable information, your best insights, and your most objective analyses. Best efforts please.'

Alternatively, you could just say that you would like a conversation based on sound reasoning, evidence, and fairness. Most people will agree to this even if they don't then act accordingly.

It may be necessary to discourage participants who use manipulative tactics and neutralize their ploys directly. Use the methods already explained for exchanges.

If someone is not sticking to reason and fairness despite being neutralized and put back on track then make more specific requests for contributions. These direct the person more explicitly to say things that will help. For example:

- 'Please name the other groups of people that would be affected if the change you have asked for was made.'

- 'Do you have any facts on the number of people in your group who might be affected?'

- 'Have you done any calculations to estimate that effect?'

- 'Can you give me a specific example of the collusion you referred to where enough detail has been made public for the collusion to be detectable?'

- 'Can you point to particular statements within the transcript of the telephone call that illustrate the problem you mentioned?'

- 'Are you aware of any survey results or other data directly relevant to this point?'

- 'What was the sample size and how were people selected for the survey?'

Let the best speaker speak

If more than one participant is ready to explain the same or similar reasoning then it is usually better for one person to do it than have people interrupt each other. The influencers might want to introduce points in different sequences, use different terminology, and perhaps different forms of analysis. It would be confusing to jump around.

Ideally, the person likely to give the best, clearest explanation should be the speaker until the line of reasoning has been covered.

So, if the approach can be coordinated then it should be. If not then participants must decide individually whether to try for control or let another be lead expositor – at least for part of the discussion – and just watch for mistakes.

Preview your longer contributions

As with one-to-one situations, explain early how your exposition is structured and what conclusions it will reach (if you know). This discourages others from interrupting and encourages them to be patient. It also helps them decide whether you should be lead expositor for a while.

Case 10: Mixed cooperative and uncooperative

In this common situation some participants are cooperative and others not. The extent to which they rely on reason and fairness also varies. The cooperative participants will rely on reason and fairness exclusively (perhaps with encouragement) but the uncooperative participants will typically stick to their position any way they can.

As in the previous Case where all participants were cooperative, it is important to encourage maximum use of reason and fairness. The same techniques can be used.

In this challenging and common Case, the following guidelines aim to:

- encourage cooperative people, reason, and fairness; and

- effectively tackle manipulative behaviour that may be complex, intense, and sustained.

Involve cooperative people

If there is a choice then hold your discussion with competent people likely to rely on reason and fairness and likely to be cooperative. Try to bring as many people as you can who also want to use just reason and fairness.

There is nothing morally wrong with bringing along people who will help keep the discussion reasoned and fair. It helps to involve people who express approval and disapproval of behaviour non-verbally and support statements promoting reason and fairness. If they form a majority in the discussion then that is better still.

The main objective is a discussion based solidly on sound reasoning and fairness instead of one undermined by manipulation or muddle. This is to seek the truth or a good and fair outcome. It is not to push for a particular point of view or outcome. Of course a discussion based on reason and fairness is more likely to reach some conclusions than others but that is because they are closer to the truth or fairer.

Clarify what is at stake

State all the stakeholders and their interests, legitimate or otherwise, in general terms. Quantification is usually impossible but if a large number is known it may help to mention it. Clarifying what is at stake helps ensure all relevant, legitimate interests are considered and brings vested interests into the open. It is even more relevant if uncooperative people are present.

If it is soon clear that some discussion participants have something personal at stake then it may help to clarify what that is early on.

This can be a powerful move. Uncooperative people who do not plan to be reasonable and fair may react aggressively. Consequently, it is usually better to be explicit about obvious interests that cannot be disputed but talk in more general terms about other interests that might be relevant.

> E.g. Suppose someone is arguing for more government money to be spent on a particular project. There will be some beneficiaries from the project and some losers who will pay for it but not benefit. Pointing out this obvious point is a powerful move for fair consideration of everyone's interests; unreasonable people in this situation usually try to pretend that government money can be used with no negative effects for others.

If you want to point out the personal interests of an individual, it is usually better to point out the interests of groups they belong to rather than make the statement personal.

Very few discussions are completely free from vested interests. What might be at stake includes:

- direct material advantages (e.g. money, food, space, inconvenience);

- power (e.g. a role, status, reputation, a law); and

- moral debt/guilt.

  E.g. A debate over Darwin's theory of evolution is nothing like a negotiation over pay. Nobody is directly arguing for cash and if Darwin was right or wrong there are few direct practical consequences. Yet these debates are often brutal. Credibility of participants is at stake. Also, if one side is religious then the size of their following is at risk, at least in a small way. These interests are so obvious they hardly need stating, but do so anyway.

Bringing vested interests into the open fundamentally shifts the conversation, making it much harder for participants to pass themselves off as disinterested.

As a discussion unfolds it can be helpful to focus on what people are asking for. Maybe their great sounding rhetoric supports a request that is blatantly unfair or illogical. Mentioning this is a reminder of the interests at stake.

  E.g. 'So, to clarify, what you are saying is that the company should pay you an additional £30,000 as compensation for your emotional upset at not getting the promotion. Have I understood you correctly?'

Talk with the cooperative people

The cooperative people in the discussion are the ones most worth conversing with. Ideally, spend time discussing directly with them, building up correct, relevant reasoning.

When uncooperative participants try to interfere with this (which they usually do) you must respond to them but with the observing cooperative people as the real audience. Your influence on the uncooperative participants is small, so spend as little time on irrelevant argument with them as possible and quickly return to making valuable contributions for those interested in real progress.

The most useful pattern for this is to neutralize, link, and continue. (This pattern was explained in detail in the earlier advice on exchanges in Chapter 6.) Responding to longer contributions by uncooperative people and others not using reason and fairness is discussed later in the current chapter.

It remains vital to avoid unnecessarily aggravating uncooperative people because it can lead to unproductive bickering and look bad to cooperative participants.

An extreme type of this situation is a debate between two people (or a very small number) observed by many others. Examples include formal debates, court cases in front of juries, conversations between a conference speaker and an audience member perhaps with a hostile question, many interviews in news media, internet forum discussions, and comments on web pages.

In these discussions:

- The speakers have little expectation of influencing each other but hope to influence the observers.

- Speakers are judged as people by observers and care how they are perceived, though this does not always push them to stick to sound reasoning and fairness.

- The quality of discussion tends to be low, with reason and fairness obliterated by advocacy and point scoring.

Your main tactic in these discussions is to stick to sound reasoning, with evidence where appropriate, and fairness. When an opponent uses an unfair tactic, neutralize it and try to continue a useful conversation.

If your opponent becomes angry do not appease and do not apologize unless you really have done something wrong. Do not hold back from stating the most important points clearly.

E.g. If your opponent is pushing quack remedies for deadly illnesses that should be treated with real medicine then say so, in clear language, matter-of-factly, and early on. Estimate the number of lives lost already because of their activities.

E.g. If your opponent is defending a system that does not work and you can prove it with facts and figures then say so clearly without delay.

Your opponent will hate this but the observers you could influence probably will not.

Criticize people with care

Occasionally it is necessary to discuss the failures of others. That may be because they are the topic of the discussion overall, the weakness of one person or group is a reason for not following a course of action, or perhaps they help explain the current situation and must be understood if things are to be made better.

This is a difficult topic because:

- your criticism might be of someone who is in the conversation;

- some people in the conversation may defend the person or group criticized;

- legal liability might be incurred;

- with these stakes, bad behaviour is more likely; and

- you are more likely to be emotional about the issue – probably frustrated.

If, perhaps out of frustration, you state or imply a criticism while making another point it gives opponents an excuse to interrupt indignantly and complain, derailing your exposition. Consequently, special care is needed.

Some reasons for apparent failure do not deserve blame or personal consequences:

- There was no failure, in reality.

- Success was impossible despite a great effort and good approach.

- The problem was a lack of skill despite good efforts to develop it.

- The problem was not knowing what was expected or required, not lack of diligence.

- The problem was something a third party did or failed to do, and reasonable precautions against the possibility were taken.

Other possible reasons may warrant blame and personal consequences:

- Not making a reasonable effort.

- Being incompetent or ignorant due to lack of effort on self-development.

- Acting selfishly.

- Acting dishonestly.

At the start of a critical discussion the causes of past performance are often unclear and it is unclear if blame and penalties will be directed indiscriminately or appropriately. People are often reluctant to discuss past performance at all, let alone critically, for fear that this will lead to blame and personal consequences, possibly unfairly.

Here are some tactics for these difficult discussions:

Explain the analysis approach: To reassure people worried that they will be unfairly blamed, explain at the outset how you would like the discussion to proceed. You would like it to be objective, specific, factual, and to make sure the reasons for what happened are thoroughly explored and understood. You do not want anyone to rush to lay blame.

Call for evidence: Ask for evidence of what happened and why. Consider that evidence thoroughly to encourage more to be supplied. Do not dismiss opinions because independent evidence is unavailable but still push for what evidence exists.

Provide and require specific information: Stay focused on what is factual and specific. If something was late, how late was it? If mistakes have been made, how many of them were there? What were the reasons for them? How do we know?

One approach to criticism is to avoid claims that identify people and acts explicitly.

> E.g. 'Certain people have been acting in questionable ways over the past week.' Who? Doing what? Why were the actions 'questionable' and how serious is this?

This vague innuendo may discourage the person being criticized from speaking up because if they did then they would identify themselves or perhaps appear to admit guilt. Vague innuendo is a nasty tactic and feels wrong when done.

It is better to be specific; identifying the people and the acts (or at least some of them).

> E.g. 'In the past week, Julie, representing the Returns Committee, has sent me three emails requesting more information about the case but, when I explained that I needed some information from her in order to respond, she did not acknowledge this or provide the information I needed.'

To do this you may need to record dates, times, names, who said what, who did what, etc. Then you can criticize specific acts or omissions.

Make comparisons with appropriate expectations: It often helps to describe reasonable, appropriate expectations for performance and behaviour, under the circumstances, before comparing those with what happened. This sometimes reveals that behaviour people have routinely accepted falls far short of reasonable expectations.

Probe for difficulties: To find all the real reasons for a performance problem, probe for difficulties. Give people a chance to explain themselves. This will also elicit excuses and attempts to blame others. Respond by asking for specific facts and focus on those.

Record multiple causes: Most things that go wrong do so for many reasons and often several people could have acted better. Record it all. If someone acknowledges their responsibility do not stop exploring causes. There may be others with responsibility who have no intention of acknowledging it.

Focus on the future: If analysing the past is not working, try switching the focus to the future. Talk about what would be reasonable expectations for future behaviour and performance. Ask if there would be problems achieving them and what needs to change to make it possible. If someone does not want to say they have failed to do something in the past, they will be more likely to say they can do it in future. You can suggest things to do in future. For example: 'To make this a success this committee should X, Y, and Z.' (Where these seem very sensible but have not been achieved in the past.)

Respond to longer manipulative contributions

Occasionally an uncooperative person makes a longer, skilfully constructed argument including multiple tricks and other manipulative tactics. Examples include presentations and videos given during meetings, speeches given in debates, articles posted online, and articles taken as the basis of a discussion. Some people are highly practised and can produce long and superficially impressive talks at any time. Longer manipulative contributions can be plausible to some participants so are more dangerous to a true and fair outcome than short, isolated tricks.

> E.g. Imagine a discussion on whether a farming method should be banned, primarily on animal welfare grounds. The practice has been studied carefully and really is unnecessarily distressing to the animals. It should be banned. A representative for the farmers affected gives a speech and over several minutes uses the following untrue or otherwise unfair arguments: (1) the animals are not distressed, (2) some animals have been distressed in the past but things are different now, (3) the meat tastes better, (4) people like the meat produced this way, (5) it is totalitarian oppression to impose restrictions on farmers' behaviour, (6) the farmers have a right to treat the animals in any way that makes commercial sense, (7) the practice is perfectly legal, and (8) the campaign to end the practice is another unfair and discriminatory assault on farmers of a particular country. The representative speaks well and seems thoughtful and calm.

Such contributions undermine the discussion with manipulative tactics and may persuade some people of things that are untrue or unfair, or reinforce misconceptions.

An effective response is needed. Sometimes it is possible to give a long response in reply (e.g. the equivalent of several paragraphs or more). This can be more influential because more time can be spent explaining logic and evidence.

The challenges of longer contributions

These longer contributions are harder to respond to effectively because:

- They deliver multiple points without an opportunity to respond, so less critical listeners can be led a long way into error before there is a chance of correction.

- The speaker's persona can be hard to deal with (e.g. posing as a plausible intellectual or someone whose vulnerability makes it seem cruel to be critical).

- They can be skilfully constructed, with many tricks cleverly combined, some of them hard to spot.

- They may be professionally presented. For example, the speaker may be famous or have a great voice, or a video may have been professionally produced.

- Some of the tricks, such as heavy reliance on social proof (i.e. 'lots of people agree with me so I must be right'), can be tough to counter.

- Debunking all the tricks might take longer than it took to make them.

- The number of points to debunk can be too many to remember.

- The tricks are often subtle and it can take hours, working from a transcript, to fully understand what has been done, but you only have seconds to decide what to say.

- The material is sometimes delivered quickly.

- The explanations are often vague and confusing, adding to the problem of being mentally overwhelming.

Fortunately, you do not have to debunk in detail a contribution that is confusing, baseless, or clearly not objective. Even cleverly designed contributions often have so many flaws that many participants in the discussion can see the pattern. This creates the opportunity to respond in a relatively simple way then put the conversation back on solid ground. Instead of getting mired in controversy around their flawed points you can move on to your sound reasoning and insightful proposals.

Give initial quality feedback

Your first response can be initial quality feedback, responding to obvious signs that the contribution is not helpful to the discussion. This can be done as soon as there is an opportunity to respond.

The purpose of this initial response is to protect the quality of the discussion for the benefit of all participants, not rebut claims for the benefit of one side in an

argument. (Remember that the objective of influence is to reach good conclusions, not win arguments.)

Make your quality feedback comments honestly from your point of view, recognizing that you may be the only person in the discussion having the same problems. If you are willing to take that risk then go ahead with feedback on quality. If the quality issues are clear enough and you are one of the most expert participants then it is usually safe.

Here are some typical problems that can be mentioned:

- There was no clear objective or process of analysis.

- Several statements were unclear or confusing. Often this will be because key terms that needed definitions for you to understand them were not. (Other people might not have this problem if they know the speaker's use of those terms already.) Claims might be quantitatively vague or too abstract.

- There were several claims that needed to be supported with evidence but were not. (People already convinced of those claims would not feel the need for evidence.)

- The approach was blatantly not objective, with a lot of animosity shown towards some people or ideas, very strong language and unreasonably strong claims made (e.g. about a person's real intentions), smears, selections of the worst cases, failure to mention obvious points of mitigation, and so on. Overall, the contribution is clearly just an angry attack and not intended to be constructive.

- There were easily noticed technical mistakes or logic flaws, perhaps all pointing in the same direction.

Initial quality feedback can describe poor contributions overall as 'not useful to me', 'unhelpful', or 'not constructive'. In the body of your response you might need to say that the contribution seemed to you 'not objective'. Do not describe the contribution as useless, biased, partisan, a rant, ideological claptrap, selfish, self-serving, or anything similar that is likely to antagonize unnecessarily.

A simple summary of the main quality issues put in neutral language may still get a hostile reaction but it sends the vital message that only objective, rational contributions are welcome.

> E.g. This is an example of some strong feedback given in response to a blatantly unobjective presentation. 'OK Simon. Thank you for that review of the progress of war in Afghanistan over the past 20 years but it wasn't as helpful as I had hoped. I got a sense that it was mainly attacking Western leaders rather than giving us an objective analysis that helps us with a specific question. You focused on the contribution of Western leaders but said nothing about the conduct of the Taliban, other Afghan leaders, the Afghan people, or any other potential contributors. You also said nothing about the possible benefits from having the Taliban out of power for 20 years. You seemed to be blaming it all on 'neo colonialism' but did not explain what neo colonialism is or how you know what people were really thinking when their stated reasons were different.'

Having given this feedback, it is crucial to return to a productive discussion. The options include:

- Asking the other person if they would like to try again, perhaps by summarizing their main argument and facts.

- Suggesting an objective and process of analysis for the conversation and then asking the other person if they would like to try again.

- Talking about the same topics as the uncooperative contributor but in clearer, more neutral language and with more cautious claims and more attention to facts.

- Talking about the same topics as the uncooperative contributor but debunking their key claims e.g. by showing that they are irrelevant, factually wrong, or unlikely to be true.

Here are illustrations of each approach, continuing with the example above about Simon's contribution on Afghanistan.

E.g. Try again: 'So, Simon, it would help me if you could just state clearly now what your key point is and identify the most important evidence.'

E.g. Try again with this objective: 'Perhaps something useful we could consider at this point is what this Afghan war tells us about the factors to think about when considering overseas intervention. Simon, would you like to suggest some key factors along those lines?'

E.g. Talk instead: 'What do we really know for sure about the story of Afghanistan over the past 20 years? We know that pushing the Taliban back was relatively quick and easy but they didn't give up and getting troops out of the country has proved very difficult. We know it is possible for relatively unsophisticated fighters to continue hostilities against better equipped, better trained forces – so I wonder how that was possible. We know that getting the government forces to a point where they could win against the Taliban has proved very difficult, and I wonder why that was.'

E.g. Debunk: 'One specific claim that I think is incorrect is that neo-colonialism was the root of the problem with the Western approach. Colonialism is where a country takes control of territory that was legitimately owned by another country intending to benefit from that land permanently. The stated intentions of the intervention in Afghanistan were to fight Al-Qaeda, establish a system of locally elected democratic government capable of defending itself, then leave. That is what has been attempted. I don't think the intervention in Afghanistan can be described as colonialism of any kind because there was no intention to stay indefinitely. If the Taliban had been less determined to impose a theocracy by war then it would have been possible to leave earlier.'

Another reason you might want to debunk a longer argument is that a clear but incorrect argument has been made, no general quality feedback is worthwhile, and you are ready to debunk an important claim.

Introduce your response if it is long

If you have more time to prepare and deliver a response to a longer manipulative contribution then you can start in a more considered way. Make clear the importance of your points and work towards detail. Here is the basic pattern:

- The article/documentary/speech is wrong on several fundamental points

- And [some of] its conclusions are incorrect

- and, if acted on, would be harmful to X, Y, Z (possibly including the very people the speaker is trying to support).

- I will explain a better way to understand this and then briefly comment on some of the problems with the contribution you have just heard.

An alternative to explaining better reasoning is to just focus on debunking. In this case, replace the last bullet point above with:

- Here's a quick list of the key errors, claims, and insinuations that may have created a false impression before I get into any details:

- <a list of moderately worded items> (e.g. 'Key details of the research were not explained', 'Words were attributed to Tony Blair that he did not say', 'Other factors were not discussed, creating the impression that only unfair discrimination was a cause of the disparities', 'Some moving case studies were presented but only for one type of case. Others were not illustrated in the same way.').

In an online posting, that initial list of issues could include links to detail (e.g. the full details of a study, a written explanation). That might be all there is space for. A group could have a website with corrections of common false claims.

Explain better reasoning

The most important part of a response to a longer manipulative contribution is usually to explain reasoning that is better. This might be true, closer to the truth, or a better plan. It should be clear, easy to follow, and logical.

This is particularly effective if the manipulative contribution was complicated, confusing, and too quick to be properly understood.

Building up a better position usually makes it easier to explain where the longer manipulative contribution was wrong, and may even make debunking unnecessary. You might explain the better reasoning immediately after giving initial quality feedback.

> E.g. Imagine a speaker has been arguing passionately about the evils of wealth inequality in the UK, claiming that all households should be equally wealthy and anything else is bad and the result of oppressive behaviour. This is factually wrong but emotionally appealing to many people. One way to start a response is to explain how people usually start poor, gradually build up wealth throughout their working years, then spend it during retirement. Explain that even in a society where everyone consumed exactly the same during their lifetimes this

pattern of lifetime saving then spending would leave some households considerably wealthier than others at any point in time. Having explained this it is easier to correct the idea that all households should be equally wealthy.

Debunk efficiently

When debunking a long argument, especially one with many elements, brevity is vital. Aim to debunk effectively in less time than it took to make the argument.

If an objective and a process of analysis have been established for the discussion it is easier to point out when contributions are irrelevant. This sometimes opens the way for a quick debunking.

> E.g. The management technique of setting people fixed targets for their work was greatly boosted by Edwin Locke and Gary Latham in their many publications on the subject (notably Locke and Latham 1981, 1990, and 2019). They typically reviewed research on goal setting up to that time and concluded that setting fixed targets was a good technique. Their reviews covered hundreds of studies and, at first, the evidence seems overwhelming: fixed goals should be used. However, if the objective of a discussion is to choose between setting fixed targets and setting relative targets, or setting a reward function that links different levels of performance to different levels of reward, then almost all this research is irrelevant. This is because almost all studies have compared setting fixed goals with no goals, easier goals, or instructions to 'do your best'.

If you are confronted with a long list of arguments or papers it may be efficient to select a sample at random and explain the results of your investigation of those items. If some of them are dodgy then that reflects poorly on the entire list. You might say 'I took a closer look at just the first 5 studies on your list and here is what I found …'

Debunking research

Research, especially done in a scientific style, is important to discussions using reason. However, research can be misused deceptively and genuine mistakes can be made in interpretation. Such arguments are like flawed mathematical writing: it looks like mathematics but is still wrong.

A single study might be explained in detail or, at the other extreme, many studies might be mentioned but with little detail beyond their supposed conclusions. Sometimes what appear to be empirical findings are just speculations or opinions given in an introduction or discussion section, or claims in purely theoretical papers.

Deceptive use of research is more dangerous when the person doing it has a calm, intellectual manner and an academic title such as Doctor or Professor. It makes them believable as learned intellectuals even if they are protecting a dangerous religious cult, want to overthrow Western society and create a communist utopia, or lost their sanity after winning a Nobel prize for something unrelated.

Identifying and explaining problems with research designs is a huge topic and part of science education. Particular branches of research have their finer points in addition to more generally applicable potential problems and their solutions.

Very common issues include:

- **Correlation without causation:** Studies that show two variables are statistically correlated are sometimes used as evidence that one causes changes in the other. This might be the case but is not a safe conclusion without a time lag or some additional reason to think the causation is in one particular direction and not the result of some third variable.

  E.g. Suppose you see a news item about research that found a connection between eating cupcakes and staying slim. Apparently, people who ate more cupcakes were slimmer and the researcher interviewed mentions chemicals often found in cupcakes that may be the cause of the slimming effect. Really? Another explanation might be that overweight people avoid cupcakes. Another is that slimmer people also tend to be different in some other way that affects their consumption of cupcakes. Without more information we do not know which, and it is wrong to talk only of cupcakes being slimming.

- **Ignoring the effect of human reactions:** Studies that look at correlations may overlook the fact that people respond to conditions.

  E.g. Imagine a study of pandemic responses shows that countries who took the most stringent lockdown measures also suffered the worst effects of the disease. Does that mean the lockdown measures made things worse? No. It is the predictable result of governments reacting to larger outbreaks by taking more stringent measures.

- **Lack of a control group:** Some studies need a control group but lack one. For example, perhaps something increased after an intervention but there were no cases where the intervention was not made so we do not know if the increase would have happened anyway.

  E.g. Imagine a doctor reveals his research that supposedly shows that a particular vaccine commonly given to children causes a rare but deadly disease. His evidence is a set of children who were given the vaccination and later developed the disease. This is wrong in more than one way. What about children who developed the disease before being vaccinated? What about children who developed the disease but were not vaccinated at all? What about children who were vaccinated and did not develop the disease. The correct statistical analysis compares frequencies in each category. To just pick the children who got the disease after being vaccinated is an elementary mistake. This is probably a health scam.

- **Inappropriate comparison:** Studies that test the effectiveness of a method or model sometimes compare it against the performance of another method or model that is a poor choice. Perhaps it is rarely used or known to perform poorly.

  E.g. Worries over bias in Artificial Intelligence (AI) programs illustrate the problem of inappropriate comparison, and others. Many articles have now been published that spread the view that AI programs are biased in an evil way. Behind the articles written by journalists for a general audience there are much more technical papers in academic journals written by experts. They seem impressive

but there are some serious recurring problems. Many compare AI performance with perfect performance and conclude that, since some AI programs do not perform perfectly, AI is a bad thing. The real choice is between AI and human reasoning, and there are many situations where AI performs better. It is also easier to study the potential for bias in AI than in human thinking. Another problem is that many fairness criteria have been suggested for AI. Some of these are irrational and do not capture a reasonable idea of fairness. Many cannot mathematically be satisfied simultaneously so a researcher who wants to say that AI is biased has only to pick a set of criteria that cannot all be satisfied at the same time.

- **Biased sampling:** Biased samples are more common than small samples. It can be very hard, in practice, to get statistically ideal samples. More often people used in studies (e.g. survey respondents) are volunteers and many people asked declined to help.

- **Experimenter effects:** People used in research studies are surprisingly keen to please researchers and many try to give results they think the researcher wants. They may do this unconsciously.

- **Statistical averaging for curves:** Many studies produce noisy, untidy data so the results from many subjects are combined into an average curve. This curve may have a compelling shape yet be the result of pooling different groups of subjects with qualitatively different behaviour whose individual curves (if they could be extracted cleanly) would look quite different.

- **Crucial details:** Reading the details of a study and imagining it in reality often reveals crucial details the researchers thought unimportant but which may have had a huge impact on the results. For example, some psychological learning studies are very long and boring. If they tell us anything it is how people behave when they are tired and bored.

When tackling a large body of research studies, check for studies that used the same or very similar methods. Instead of tackling studies one at a time, it is usually possible to critique one method used by many studies.

E.g. Many studies appear to show that people, even young children, and some other primates prefer sharing equally. However, all these studies provided no reason for unequal division. In the relatively few studies that provided a reason for unequal shares (e.g. one person has been lazy and unhelpful while the other has made an effort and been helpful) subjects have preferred to allocate shares in a way that rewards good behaviour. This was used as an efficient debunking argument by Starmans, Sheskin, and Bloom (2017).

Often the longer contribution does not have a clear argument, preventing a clean debunking. An alternative is to debunk its gist. Summarize the main claims (potentially just implied or insinuated) and counter them.

Sometimes an expert has already done the debunking so you can use their analysis.

E.g. In the social sciences, most researchers are left-leaning, so examples of researchers who have focused on debunking tend to be in opposition to this. Lee

Jussim has written extensively on bias. Christina Hoff Sommers has critiqued feminist research. Both go into detail and debunk carefully.

Having responded to an incorrect and manipulative longer contribution, it is important to continue with correct reasoning and apply fairness in decisions. Successful debunking is not always progress in a constructive direction.

Debunking cases

Cases can be useful sources of information but can be used deceptively. One trick is to select only supportive cases and talk about them as if there are no others. In a longer contribution it is possible to describe several cases and create the sense that the same thing is happening repeatedly and is typical.

Sometimes only a small number of cases, or just one, is used but presented to maximize emotional impact by focusing on the harrowing details of a vulnerable person's horrible experience. Usually this is an extreme and untypical case but presented as if typical.

To debunk this trick, point out the need for statistical data to show how often such cases arise. Do not say the person has been 'cherry picking', has been selective, or has used an emotive argument, even when this has happened. Just move on to the more relevant evidence.

> E.g. 'Those cases are quite interesting and give us some idea of what *can* happen, but *how frequently* does this occur and how is the severity distributed? Are there also cases where the scheme has worked well? To understand that we need statistical data, ideally based on proper sampling or a comprehensive analysis. Let's take a look at …'

People who have had power for a while have usually been responsible for both good and bad outcomes – more so than people without power. This inspires some attacks on them based on selecting bad outcomes only.

> E.g. White British men have been unusually powerful over the last few hundred years thanks largely to the Industrial Revolution and British Empire. If someone wants to attack white people, people from Britain, or men then there are many available cases of bad behaviour leading to bad outcomes for others. However, there are also many cases of good behaviour leading to good outcomes for others. Overall human progress (e.g. higher life expectancy, abolition of slavery, modern conveniences, more choice for women) has been accelerated over the past few hundred years in part by white British men.

Debunking other fake evidence

Fake evidence goes far beyond dubious research. Some examples:

- Interviewers who try for a 'gotcha' soundbite to use without context as a negative smear on the interviewee.

- Journalists who create stories about nothing by misrepresenting and misinterpreting trivial incidents and innocent coincidences (e.g. 'failure to deny',

'the minister insisted', 'questions unanswered', 'undisclosed details', 'allegations', 'links', 'faced criticism').

- Surveys with loaded or complex questions that elicit statistics to support misleading claims.

- Indexes purporting to show inequality, poverty, or corruption that are bogus, guesswork, biased, or misnamed to create an impression. E.g. 'in poverty', 'fuel poverty', 'food poverty', 'cancel culture', 'crony capitalism', 'inequality'.

- Journalistic case studies that highlight an unrepresentative case, exaggerate the harrowing details, and make unjustified assertions about causes.

- Statistical modelling that nobody understands.

- Histories based on selective or incorrect information to blame someone unfairly.

- Estimates (sometimes just guesses) whose basis is unclear or unstated.

Chains of citations separate initial facts (if any) from later claims. Motivated people energetically manufacture source material. Others write secondary documents and social media postings that cite and quote the original source. Others write documents that cite and quote the secondary sources. Soon a community is writing as if some claims are established facts when, in reality, they are long-forgotten distortions and lies. Many in that community are astonishingly confident despite being mistaken and readily accuse others of being naïve, deluded, or 'sheeple'.

Skilled users of corrupt 'evidence' weave claims together to create a seemingly well-supported grand theory or story.

It can be hard to make progress against a large body of corrupt 'evidence'. However, people using this kind of material often express a lack of objectivity through colourful language, personal attacks, and smears that are not directly relevant evidence. This creates an opportunity to give initial quality feedback as described above. Personal attacks can often be neutralized quickly before returning to the important content of the discussion. You may be able to analyse a random sample and report the results.

You can debunk a particular trick if you know the facts. For example, if you know the details then you can explain the facts behind distorted history, how a statistic has been calculated and why it is misleading, or how the exact wording of a survey question was misleading.

A useful time-saver is the discovery of a source so outrageously unreliable that it discredits all the other claimed sources.

> E.g. Imagine you are discussing vaccine safety with someone who cites a paper that seems detailed and scientific. However, you notice that one of the two authors describes himself as a 'naturopathic oncologist'. This means someone who advocates alternative medicine (i.e. not medicine but unproven quack treatments) to treat cancer. This is one of the worst of all health scams and discredits the paper, any paper that relies on it, and anyone who claims it as supportive evidence in a discussion.

Debunking social proof

Social proof is the evidence from many people agreeing. Lots of people agreeing typically makes something more likely to be true but is unreliable and often of little value. Tricks are often played with social proof.

Social proof is definitive on matters such as the meaning of words and the most popular song but virtually useless on matters such as the cause of a mysterious disease or the way Bitcoin really works. It also tends to block new ideas (e.g. new ways of doing things) because initially, with almost nobody looking enthusiastic, it seems the ideas are overwhelmingly rejected.

Arguments using social proof can be deceptive. Sometimes people rely heavily on social proof because their position is wrong but widely accepted. Social proof favours them but directly relevant empirical evidence and careful theoretical analysis do not, so they use social proof.

> E.g. Journalists often pull together quotes from a variety of people, organizations, and publications that broadly support a perspective. The sheer number of people mentioned, all seeming to agree, increases the sense of social proof. If some of them have doctorates or Nobel prizes, all the better, even if their academic qualifications are not relevant to the issue. Experts who disagree are not quoted or are presented in smaller numbers as a dissenting and perhaps eccentric minority.

It helps to remember that on many hotly debated issues with two sides, each side has millions of people who agree. Millions of people must be wrong; often everyone is wrong.

When responding to irrelevant or deceptive social proof arguments, try to neutralize their effects and refocus the discussion on more reliable evidence. Often that can be done by pointing to the limitations of social proof and redirecting towards more reliable evidence.

> E.g. 'That presentation mentioned a number of people who agree that disaggregation is a good idea but of course there are also quite a lot of people who think it is a bad idea. The evidence we should use is the directly relevant evidence, so let's forget about who thinks what and take another look at the results from modelling and experiments that are directly relevant.'

Neutralizing social proof can be frustratingly difficult and may take time.

A basic trick that is played is to gather together (physically or online) people who support a position. This creates the impression of many supporters and few dissenters. This can be countered by pointing out the absent dissenters and moving the discussion away from social proof.

Often bad ideas are less popular than they seem. (They are bad ideas, after all.) They have some prominent supporters but many silent detractors.

Bad practices, to take an important group of bad ideas, may have been imposed on people rather than chosen by them. The people who imposed those practices perhaps do not have to use them or suffer the consequences of their use personally. The practices may not be used as widely, often, or rigorously as it seems. And

perhaps nobody has properly evaluated the effectiveness or efficiency of the bad practice.

E.g. Some documents about risk management create the impression that everyone uses Risk Registers (and the related process of listing risks) to manage risk. (This method is sometimes called Risk Listing.) In reality:

- Risk Listing is only used in large companies, charities, and public sector organizations in some countries.

- Even there it isn't used often; in many cases it is just an annual ritual.

- Only a tiny percentage of employees are directly involved with using it.

- And even those employees do not think about Risk Listing most of the time.

- Overall, a tiny proportion of all decisions involve any element of Risk Listing even in those organizations where it is used at all. (A large organization might claim it uses Risk Listing on an almost daily basis but this will still be for a tiny fraction of their many, many decisions.)

- Even on those occasions when the method is used it rarely contributes new ideas or better organization of ideas. Instead, the required forms are filled in using existing ideas developed in other ways.

- Almost nobody who uses Risk Listing does it because they personally chose to do so; far more often someone else thought it would be a good idea and imposed it.

- Most of those who imposed it were not experts in risk management and had little idea of the problems their choice would create for other people.

- And many of those who imposed it did so only because they thought others in the room at the time thought it was a good idea.

- And of that tiny minority who chose it personally, very few did so because they had a good reason. There have been no solid scientific tests of Risk Listing's value compared to sensible alternatives.

- The 'evidence' for the value of Risk Listing is restricted to personal opinions based on experience (but not systematically collected or analysed), selected anecdotes (ignoring anecdotes that tell the opposite story), inconclusive correlations (not causation), and comparisons with doing nothing (not with using the same resources in other ways).

You can point out these factors and report the results of surveys that ask people individually what they really think about the bad practice.

Another mechanism that helps entrench bad practices is the human tendency to judge our beliefs from our own actions. If we use a bad practice then we tend to assume we think the practice is good. If the reason we do something is obvious coercion then this tendency is much less. However, if we just do something because it seemed to be an expectation of our job then we can sometimes mistakenly think we do it because we like it.

One way to weaken this mechanism is to mention other reasons the practice may be in use, such as historical reasons no longer applicable, imposition by a rule, apparent expectations of others, or simply not knowing enough about a better alternative.

Debunking the cloak of vulnerability

A popular modern ploy is to pose as a vulnerable person who would be hurt by disagreement. The effect is amplified by claims that the vulnerable speaker has been treated badly in the past (perhaps by others in the discussion or people demographically similar to them) and so is entitled to sympathy, generous treatment, and even taking revenge.

Disagreement or critical analysis may be portrayed as intimidating, oppressive, discriminatory, violent (a verbal form of violence rather than violence as usually defined), denial, bullying, or hate speech.

The best way to counter this is to refocus the discussion on relevant evidence and analysis then let that do its work. It is not someone in the discussion who is being mean; it is just the unwelcome facts being what they are.

> E.g. Suppose someone has been complaining about something and demanding special help. The complaint was unconvincing but invoked the protective power of vulnerability. In response you might say 'I understand the situation you have described and as you see it, but to really understand the situation and decide what to do we need to look at the best available data on performance. There are some relevant research reports from the Office of National Statistics and from our own monitoring, so let's have a look at what they tell us about performance over the past two years.' This is an appropriate response whether the facts agree with the person's complaints and demands or not. If the facts do not agree then patiently working through them will lead to a better conclusion than accepting or debating the individual's complaints directly.

Do not say 'facts don't care about your feelings' or in any other way provoke anger unnecessarily. Simply bypass the vulnerability issue by identifying relevant evidence and analysis and proposing it be looked at carefully.

Debunking relativism

People often like different types of food, music, and art. Although there are some fundamental factors that shape our preferences (e.g. toxicity and nutritional content of food, degree of predictability with art and music) there are also individual differences. These are personal preferences and largely beyond criticism. For example, if someone says they like traditional jazz then they are probably in the best position to know and their assertion is hard to contradict. Traditional jazz is enjoyable for them. It is good music as far as they are concerned.

Tricks based on relativism over-extend this idea of individual preferences and apply it to matters where there is just uncertainty (e.g. moral questions, uncertain factual matters) and even to factual matters where there is no real uncertainty.

Some people feel virtuous about their relativist view. They think it is smart to see both sides in a conflict as equally guilty (even if they are not) and to sympathise with terrorists.

Sometimes the person maintains that their perspective is due to their demographic group memberships rather than being simply personal. For example, they may say 'as a straight white male…' or 'as a mathematician…'. The idea is that if other people do not belong to the same group then they cannot possibly understand or question the claims made.

In the extreme, it is sometimes claimed that there is no objective truth. This leads towards unhelpful rows where the loudest, most emotional, most numerous hope to get what they want by power.

In an effective discussion we want to get beyond opinions and assumptions and get closer to objective truth (which exists but is often unknown for now). Relativist tricks push in the opposite direction, claiming that incorrect claims and guesses are personal opinions and, as such, should not be criticized and do not have to respond to evidence or logic. The sentiment is something like: 'I'm entitled to my opinion and everyone's opinion is valid.'

Terms that are alternatives to 'opinion' include 'belief', 'faith', 'perspective', 'narrative', 'viewpoint', 'experience', 'lived experience', and 'my truth'.

The reality is that the contributions of different people often are of very different validity and value, with some people offering a lot of relevant evidence and correct reasoning while others offer premature conclusions based on very little. It is better if people offer relevant and reliable observations, information, and analysis. It is also better if they suggest courses of action that they have thought through sufficiently well that they are worth serious consideration.

In responding to this ploy, you need to avoid seeming to dismiss the person's contribution while still refocusing the conversation on reason and evidence.

> E.g. 'OK, well let's see how your personal experience compares with the available statistics on where this moth has been observed across the UK.'

> E.g. 'The perspective we have heard from followers of the Holy Sayer is that they are deeply offended by this type of music but what matters here is the objective harmfulness of this music. What are the real harms they suffer, if any? Does the music cause non-believers suffering? What about believers who have not been encouraged to be upset by the music? Does the problem lie with the music or with the thinking that causes a strong negative reaction to it?'

Debunking fake controversy

People sometimes want to create the appearance of a continuing controversy. This section considers two situations where this happens.

Motivated doubt

The first situation is where someone has a reason to prolong uncertainty about a matter that is being settled in a largely scientific way. This may delay a decision or avoid legal liability.

E.g. During the 20th century, when strong evidence first emerged that smoking cigarettes was causing many deaths from lung cancer, some cigarette manufacturers funded researchers to produce research and papers that would delay the inevitable conclusion that the cigarettes were killing many, many people. The details are explained in Cummings et al (2007).

The approach combines two tactics:

- Keep criticizing the evidence so far to make it seem that there is still uncertainty (because the experts do not yet agree).

- Maintain that the remaining uncertainty is too great for significant decisions to be taken.

Tactics that may be used by tricksters within an encounter include:

- An impressive scientific manner, credentials, and displays of scientific knowledge.

- A long list of criticisms of research the person wants to discredit. This may focus on methods, samples (size and bias), equipment, documentation, pre-registration or lack of it, departures from the pre-registered method, equipment, statistical treatments, and the independence of experimenters or subjects. Some of these may be so complicated and hard to understand that almost nobody does understand them, which is perfect for maintaining the appearance of controversy. Some of these criticisms will be wrong, some valid but trivial, and a few valid and important but not crucial.

- The significance of each criticism will usually be exaggerated. Even trivial documentation matters unlikely to have influenced the results may be claimed as fundamental flaws that mean the study should be ignored completely and taken as yet more evidence that the researchers are biased and unreliable.

- Many alternative explanations for findings, some of which are being researched or will be.

- A pattern of not conceding when a criticism was wrong or unimportant, or when an alternative theory has been eliminated because it is not consistent with evidence. Instead of conceding, the person just moves on to their next talking point.

- Talking up the difficulty of the decision and the need for more convincing evidence before anything is concluded.

The overall effect is to keep attention off the overall picture of evidence and direct it to details while maintaining a flow of quibbles that creates the impression of ongoing doubt.

In response to these tactics, it is important to counteract this overall effect. Look for an opportunity to give an overview of the full evidence available. Mention the types of evidence and include the view a person might take before scientific evidence is considered.

> E.g. If you were talking in the late 1950s about whether smoking causes lung cancer your summary of evidence types might be something like this: 'Before we get into those details I'd just like to mention that evidence on this risk comes from a variety of sources. To begin with, everyone knows that smoking involves deeply inhaling smoke into the lungs and it is hard to see how that cannot have some effect on health. Non-smokers, in particular, will know how unpleasant it is to be in a smoky room. Post-mortems show that heavy smokers have lungs that look dirty and unhealthy. If smoking did not cause serious illness then that would be the surprise. Cigarette smoke contains many chemicals and it would be surprising if none of these had any carcinogenic effect. The more recent scientific evidence shows that the rise of smoking and the rise in lung cancer are related, with a plausible time delay. We also know that, in a large sample of doctors, smokers more often developed lung cancer. The scale of the difference is consistent with the epidemiological evidence.'

This reminds everyone that there is already a large body of evidence and so the points that will be discussed are unlikely to be significant in the big picture.

Also, state your current view based on the overall evidence to date. This is to counter the logically incorrect argument that, while there is some doubt, no decision can or should be taken.

> E.g. Continuing with the smoking example above, you might summarize by saying: 'For me the existing evidence, even without experimental confirmation, makes me about 90% confident that smoking really is the main cause of the large rise of lung cancer in this country. That, combined with the other harmful effects of smoking, should be more than enough to proceed with restrictions on the advertising and sale of cigarettes, and on smoking in the workplace.'

Mention other reasons you consider relevant to the decision. This again explains why the detailed quibbles to be discussed cannot make much difference.

> E.g. Still with the smoking example: 'Other factors for restricting cigarettes are their contribution to fire risk, the financial cost for smokers, their loss of taste, and the tendency for smokers to smoke even when it is unpleasant for non-smokers, including so often their own children.'

Ask that the criticisms of research be presented in descending order of importance. This removes from the minds of participants any suspicion that there might be an important weakness still to come. Instead, if they start to realize that all the criticisms are minor then they will want to give less time to the remaining trivial points.

In responding to each criticism, be patient and careful and encourage others to respond the same way. Try to get to the truth rather than just defend the research. Clearly state where criticisms have some validity but summarize what would have to happen for a weakness to lead to misleading results and estimate the maximum impact.

Do not accept the idea that a weakness in some research means it must be ignored altogether. If it is still more consistent with the theory that the critic is trying to

resist than with other theories then the study is positive evidence even if not as conclusive as one might like.

Where a criticism proves unfounded or exaggerated, ask for explicit confirmation of this before agreeing to move to a new criticism.

Motivated outrage

Another situation where fake controversy is a problem involves outrage. Someone says something factually correct, not misleading, fair, and not unnecessarily antagonizing but which is against the interests of a person or group. They respond by angrily complaining that the original speaker has said something controversial, insulting, offensive, disrespectful, perhaps blasphemous, harmful, hateful, and so on. Their key claims are that the original speaker is blameworthy and an angry reaction is reasonable. In some cases there may be intimidation by threatened reputation damage, boycotts, or even physical intimidation including death threats. The irrationally angry reaction may be defended as religious, cultural, or a matter of mental health for a vulnerable group.

The real reasons for this kind of behaviour may be varied and hard to identify. Perhaps they want to silence criticism. Perhaps they want to see how far they can intimidate people. Perhaps they feel angry at being defied and interpret it as being offended in some more abstract way.

If you are the person who made the initial statement then do not apologize and do not accept the claim that something controversial was said. Do not say anything that is untrue, misleading, unfair, or unnecessarily antagonizing. Explain why the outraged reaction is inappropriate. Repeat the initial claim if it is important to do so.

> E.g. Imagine that you expressed the view that e-scooters are being ridden on public paths and roads, and that this is dangerous and illegal so police should enforce the law on e-scooters. In response, an e-scooter salesman has become angry, claiming that you are making an attack on working-class lads who enjoy e-scooters and cannot afford more expensive forms of transport. He says your statement was provocative and demands to know why you said it. You might reply as follows: 'I am concerned at the danger to e-scooter riders, primarily. What I said was true and reasonable. I said they are dangerous and riding them on public paths and roads is illegal, which currently is true. E-scooters provide no protection to the rider and lack other safety features. Some are fast. I said the police should enforce the law, which is what they are there for.'

> It would be unnecessarily antagonizing and quite dangerous to add that the salesman's reaction is just fake outrage and that he should think about the safety of working-class lads instead of his own profits. It would be pointless to complain that he is trying to deny your freedom of speech; just speak freely but in a way that nobody can reasonably object to.

Survive intense, sustained attacks

In some discussions you may be attacked repeatedly by one or more people who hope to beat you in what they see as a contest. They will keep up a steady, unyielding barrage of nasty attacks hoping that you will become tired, emotional,

and vulnerable. In an online discussion they may try to wear you down by pushing you into time-consuming work searching the internet, reading documents, answering their questions, and making dozens of postings in response to them. They are waiting for particular behaviours they can attack further.

> E.g. Imagine that, after a sustained attack, you respond angrily. The attackers leap on this, attacking you as aggressive, bullying, or dictatorial. It does not matter to them that they have already been aggressive. It is vital that you continue with good reasons and avoid being unnecessarily antagonistic.

> E.g. Imagine that, after a sustained attack, you respond wearily or humorously. The attackers attack you for not taking the matter seriously. Again, it is vital that you continue with good reasons and avoid giving opportunities for attacks.

The attackers will often behave as competitive advocates. It is their prowess against yours, not a shared search for progress. If they win, they are right (they think). They want to find things they know that you do not or make you hesitate, seem unsure, or back away.

Attackers sometimes fire several questions at their victim. The questions may be demands for definitions of terms that are clear enough already, obscure factual questions they think they can answer and hope you can't, or highlighting supposed weaknesses in your proposals. They will demand answers.

If you can answer at least some of their questions with valuable contributions then do so. Quite often the answers are irrelevant to the issues so point that out then move on to a more valuable contribution.

If you cannot do either of these efficiently then you may get stuck in a controversy that wastes your time and gives them more chances to claim victories and pound you with more questions. They have control of the discussion. They will claim you are ignorant because you cannot answer their questions, or that you are avoiding a question because the answer wins their case, or that you are not listening.

Your objective is not to 'win' the argument or to influence your attackers (who are not open to reason). You want to influence observers who may be open to reason. So, continue using reason and switch to something more interesting to them and easier to follow. This might be a recap on the evidence so far that puts the current dispute into context or an explanation of the tactics of your attackers. If you want to exit the discussion then say something like 'I have other things to do now so I'll just finish with a summary of the major points.'

Monitor manipulators

As a discussion develops, some people may occasionally use tricks or abuse power rather than rely exclusively on reason and fairness. Some people may get muddled as a result. Monitor these lapses so you can act when appropriate. Focus on identifying persistent offenders.

It can be hard to distinguish between someone relying on sound reasoning and someone only pretending to. Some of the 'baloney detection' tests suggested fail because a supposedly flawed argument type might legitimately be used by a soundly reasoning person. For example, arguing from authority or from popular opinion can

be used legitimately as well as illegitimately. For example, it is relevant (though not conclusive) that most climate scientists think the earth is getting warmer.

Here are some behaviours that, if observed repeatedly, more reliably indicate failure to rely on reason:

- Extremely implausible generalizations across large groups of people.

- Crude name calling and swearing; blatantly dismissive rudeness.

- Emotive or framing language that insinuates unsubstantiated claims. This is often used in ad hominem attacks and slurs. It is worse if the hinted claims are serious.

- Failure to explicitly concede points lost. Tricksters much prefer to move on to another point.

- Repeated reasoning flaws that could be legitimate errors but are stupid and always favour the direction the trickster is arguing (e.g. inconsistencies, omissions, ignoring obvious alternative interpretations, misinterpretations, and misrepresentations).

- Simple assertions free of detail and reasons.

- Impenetrable delusion or circular logic (e.g. 'The devil put fossils in the ground to trick us.' or 'God put fossils in the ground to test us.'). There is no way forward if all tangible evidence is dismissed like this.

Emotive and framing language with unsubstantiated implications is so common that this point alone will identify many instances of bad behaviour. Entire newspapers are written in this style.

Books on critical thinking itemize many interesting thinking faults and these occur occasionally. However, the vast majority of faults in ordinary discussions are of a few crude types. Name calling is remarkably common, as is incompetent, vague muddle.

If you decide to explain the trick a person is trying to use then do not do so by giving a name; instead just explain the trick in plain language. For example, do not complain that someone is gaslighting, straw-manning, or dog-whistling.

> E.g. If someone makes a series of flawed arguments in rapid succession do not complain that they are using a Gish Gallop. Instead, say 'You have made too many arguments too quickly for us to have a sensible discussion and, although I noticed more than one flawed argument as you raced through, I'm not going to try to work through all those points. I'll just focus on a few key points, …'

Give a warning

If you have a position of power in a discussion then you may be able to warn someone who is deliberately departing from reason and fairness repeatedly. You could highlight the difference between the conversation taking place and what was hoped for, then say you want to get back on track. For example:

- 'I'm not getting the information, the analysis, or insights that I was hoping for. What relevant, reliable data can you contribute?'

- 'This has not been as useful / productive / rational as I was hoping for. Can we try to stick to a systematic analysis that's going to cover all the stakeholders and their interests?'

- 'So far this conversation has been much more negative than I was hoping for. To consider the idea properly we first need to try to find solutions to potential problems and ways to exploit the idea further. Can we please try again to do that?'

It is tempting to go into why things have gone poorly and whose fault it is. Very possibly you have participants who have used a series of dirty tricks to protect their vested interests. Secretly you may yearn to spell out how their smears, emotive words, outright lies, and feigned morality are blatant and crooked.

Sadly, an attack on the guilty can give them an excuse to complain in return and send the conversation off in an even less productive direction.

A better alternative is to acknowledge that they have successfully communicated their position before signalling your disappointment. For example, these might precede the statements above:

- 'I can see that you want/think X and you've been trying very hard to promote it. But…'

- 'I can see that you don't like the idea of X and you've been trying very hard to shoot it down. But…'

Another approach is to state your suspicions and the reasons for them. This is easier if you have considerable power and the bad behaviour has been obvious. For example:

- 'Your comments have been dismissive but without giving reasons. If you had real objections, you would have given them by now. This makes me suspect you are just trying to wind me up.'

- 'I am beginning to think you are not sincere because you seem much too upset for something so small. I suspect you may be saying whatever you think will get you what you want.'

- 'I suspect that your intention is to create the impression of a controversy to delay or block action being taken on this matter. You have raised a series of objections that have been shown to be irrelevant or unfounded. Instead of acknowledging your failures you have just moved on to another objection.'

Call the bluff and move towards using power

If you have insufficient power to deal with someone who is not using reason and fairness it may help to explain their approach so that others who, collectively, have the power to act are more likely to. Calling the manipulator's bluff is much more effective when it is clear to most people watching that they are being manipulative.

One case is where the unfair behaviour is all in one encounter.

E.g. Suppose you are in a conversation with someone who turns out to be a religious zealot determined to defend his sect's practice of beating children weekly to teach them the power of a supernatural being. He is an official representative of the sect and skilled at presenting his position. While remaining calm and even smiling serenely at times he claims that the beatings are not very painful since the stick used is only light and is used in a loving way, that the children are not upset and only occasionally cry, and that the beatings have been shown to promote better performance at school. Finally, he says you are oppressing him by restricting his religious freedom.

Few people watching this debate will be persuaded by these rather absurd arguments, even though they superficially resemble a reasonable position. Most people, like you, will suspect that his real reasons for defending the beatings are not these and that he is probably motivated by fear of the supernatural being, a desire to look good in the eyes of other followers, and a desire to hold on to the power his religion gives him. It looks like he just hopes to confuse the issues, create a sense of controversy, and discourage or block politicians and law enforcers from acting.

It is probably a mistake to point this out immediately the first absurd argument is put forward. Let them build up into a clear pattern. Then say something like:

'Your points have been cleverly worded and skilfully put but in essence you have said that hitting children is good for them and your religion should entitle you to do anything you like, even if it is cruel and unlawful. I suspect you're just trying to create a sense of doubt around this clear-cut issue to discourage politicians and law enforcers from acting to stop this practice. Beating children as you have been doing is clearly wrong and no religion makes it right. Reasoning with you, as we have just seen, is unlikely to make any difference and it is time to simply act firmly and stop this without delay.'

This clarifies what has been going on and invites others to join together and do what needs to be done without wasting more time on futile conversations with someone who cannot be reasoned with. This move might be followed up with other arguments to mobilize law enforcement.

In this example of a religious zealot the arguments were weak and used in rapid succession so it was easy for onlookers to see the pattern and you to call it out. A pattern can also develop if the same trick argument is used across different encounters. This might be a series of encounters where you were involved.

E.g. Imagine you attend a series of committee meetings where someone uses the same trick argument whenever a particular issue comes up to block progress and protect a vested interest. Even when their trick has been conclusively debunked, they have not conceded the point and have simply brought back the same trick at later meetings, now describing their position as a 'view' or 'opinion', as if this makes it untouchable even though it is a factual or logical claim that is wrong. In response you might be able to say:

'Last time we discussed this you made the same objection and the reasons why it is not correct were very clearly explained. Those reasons still apply. There is no reason to go over them again and no reason to delay our decision.'

Alternatively, the unreasonable person might have been using tricks across several encounters where you were not present.

E.g. Imagine that an 'activist' has used the same emotive and misleading argument repeatedly in different press releases or interviews. Even when their trick has been debunked, they have conceded nothing and now preface their trick by referring to the logic that debunks it as a 'trope', as if it is something that itself has been long debunked and has no weight, even though logically the counterargument remains conclusive. You might be able to say:

'The claim you have just made has been discussed in detail before and it is now well known that there are other, more likely explanations. These you say are 'tropes' but you have no new facts or insights and you are just repeating the same discredited campaigning lines. There is no point in going over it all again and what the Council should do now is to …'

Case 11: Discussion rule breaking and enforcement

This is the Case where a discussion has rules (or guidelines, or expectations) and someone to enforce them but the enforcer needs encouragement to act. (You are not the enforcer.) Examples include a meeting with a chairperson, a court case with a judge, and an online discussion with a reviewer or moderator.

Although the enforcer almost always has the evidence needed to act, no action has taken place for some reason. Perhaps the enforcer:

- Was not paying attention when the infringement took place.

- Did not realise a rule was broken.

- Realised but was worried about negative consequences of intervening.

- Is biased and happy to support the offender.

This Case excludes two types of legal enforcement outside the discussion: (1) Discussions in public that might give rise to civil legal action for defamation. (2) Discussions that might be criminal.

The guidelines in this Case aim to:

- increase your understanding of discussion rules that might be helpful; and

- encourage discussion rule enforcers to act appropriately.

Learn the rules

Knowing the rules, guidelines, or expectations in detail can help you alert the enforcer to infringements. Understanding what reason and fairness look like in a discussion and how they differ from tricks and abuses of power will also help.

Examples of rules and guidance for discussions include rules governing court procedures, Erskine May: Parliamentary Practice (the book for the British Parliament), guidance and standards for company board chairmen, rules for a debate, committee procedure rules, and community guidelines for social media.

Ask the enforcer to consider intervening

Enforcers usually do not like people telling them what to do or what conclusions to reach. If you can, ask them to consider intervening rather than saying they should intervene or telling them what view to take.

> E.g. In cricket players shout 'Howzat', which is a lazy way to say 'how was that?' meaning 'please let us know if that was out or not.' This is the right approach. Players do not shout 'Out!'

Your request will still put pressure on the enforcer to act correctly. If they do not then it is more obvious to everyone that they are behaving badly themselves.

> E.g. Imagine that Sandra is chairing a meeting that has become confused and is rambling. You say 'Sandra, to help us keep this discussion focused on the main decision we need to make, would you consider summarizing the main options now under consideration?' She can still say 'No, I think we're doing just fine.' but your request has prompted her to make the effort to intervene and bring the discussion back to order. You have also made it easier for her to intervene by signalling to everyone that someone is not content with the discussion.

Even if your request is denied it may help to put people on alert, realising that they were close to infringement, you noticed, and the enforcer has been alerted.

On social media, complaint forms rarely give this option. Usually you must choose which type of bad behaviour you think you are reporting from a list. Sometimes the available categories do not match the community guidelines and there is no way to report some infringements and no place to explain the issue. Do the best you can.

Use phrases from the rules

Where there are written rules or guidelines it may help jog the enforcer's memory to use distinctive phrases from them.

> E.g. Erskine May (the guidance for Parliamentary practice in the UK) talks about 'unparliamentary language'. A politician insulted even more than usual by an opponent might say: 'Mr Speaker, the Right Honourable Gentleman's claims before he put his question were overblown, extreme, and insulting to me. I wonder if you would consider if they constituted unparliamentary language?'

Suggest which rules may have been broken

If there are written rules or guidelines it may help to suggest which may have been broken. In a written request you could quote the rule or guideline as a convenience for readers.

Clarify the perpetrator's intent

Sometimes someone is ambiguous and it is unclear if they have broken a rule. It may be possible to clarify their intention and infringement, or push them to retract.

> E.g. Suppose you are discussing a vaccine on a social media platform that has banned misinformation about vaccines. The other person says 'The vaccine has not been fully tested' leaving some ambiguity as to whether they mean it has not been through the testing needed for licensing and full-scale use or has not been through the monitoring for rare problems that takes place once full-scale use has begun. You might ask for clarification. If they claim incorrectly that the testing required for licensing has not been done then that is vaccine misinformation and an infringement of the rules. If they clarify that they just mean that monitoring is still incomplete then there is no infringement, although they may have deliberately tried to spread misinformation using this ambiguity.

Case 12: Uncooperative discussion controller

In this Case the person with most control in the discussion is also uncooperative, aiming to get their way even though it is not fair. Situations where one person has most control of a discussion include meetings with a chairperson, meetings where one person has higher status in an organization, and interviews where one person's role allows them to ask all the questions. Interviews include interviews for broadcasting, interviews by law enforcement officers, by auditors, consultants, therapists, potential employers, and barristers questioning witnesses in court. This power can be abused.

> E.g. Imagine that a standards committee that meets quarterly has a chairman who runs the committee to support his own pet projects and block others. The agenda is always long, generic, and short on explanation. During meetings nobody really knows what is coming next. The chairman often makes long contributions of his own, rambling on for several minutes at a time as if the committee is just there to listen to his achievements. He permits irrelevant contributions by others to continue without control and his meetings regularly over-run. He often says he thinks the mood of the meeting is in favour of, or against, something when he has no basis for that belief but he wants that to be the agreement. He gives time and support to projects he favours but not others. He makes tough demands of projects he is not interested in but not of those he favours. His questions to the committee typically omit options he does not want considered. When good suggestions are made that he does not like he fails to hear and understand them correctly and what makes it into documentation is often not the suggestion made.

Interviewers have a variety of tricks they can use. For example, they can press for details the interviewee cannot remember or does not know. They can demand unreasonable guarantees. In court they can ask questions that require a 'yes' or 'no' answer in ways that create a false impression. They can interrupt repeatedly, often

changing the subject abruptly. They can summarize the interviewee's position inaccurately with 'So what you are saying is …'

> E.g. Imagine a television interview where the interviewer for some reason disapproves of the scientist and author he is about to interview. The interviewer introduces the interview with some words the interviewee does not hear: 'My next guest is a controversial author whose views on parenting have been widely condemned. But he is also enthusiastically supported by readers who include members of far right and fundamentalist religious organizations.' In reality, the author's books are solid science but have become the focus for bitter rows between various factions.

> The interviewer then asks questions about the author's personal, psychological motives for writing his books. Although the interviewee tries to explain his desire to make life better for children and their parents, the interviewer keeps interrupting and asking about the author's own childhood, implying that somehow it was traumatic or odd and that the author is psychologically flawed as a result.

> The interviewer never quite lets the author complete an answer. Occasionally the interruption is to complain that a question has not been answered. At other times it is to question a detail of the answer that is only just beginning. The manner is dismissive and impatient. The author switches topic repeatedly in an effort to keep up with the flow of questions. The interviewer finally ends the interview by saying, 'Well, thank you, and that's all we've got time for but coming up next we talk to a Satanist who recommends eating raw meat before bedtime. See you after this break.'

Interviewers can also ask loaded questions, such as the classic 'When did you stop beating your wife?', that combine an implied assertion (that you have beaten your wife in the past) with the question to be answered.

> E.g. A loaded question that might have been put to President Trump is: 'Mr President, given the recent reports that you have begun beating your wife, again, how can you guarantee women that they are safe under your administration?' This is loaded with the smears that he previously beat his wife and that he is doing it again. (The 'recent reports' could be just speculations made by the same journalist, perhaps based on the President saying he had beaten his wife at poker.) But the question that follows is itself extremely tricky because it conflates the safety of women from him personally with women across the country being safe. He cannot guarantee that women across the country are safe (but it sounds bad to say that) and if he guarantees that women are safe from him some will misunderstand that and think that he is guaranteeing safety from all harms. Others will think that, because he gives a guarantee, this implies that he has beaten his wife. Finally, to make it harder the question does not ask for a guarantee; it asks how he can make such a guarantee, which he has not made (potentially another loaded item).

These discussions are difficult for honest, cooperative participants who just want to get to good conclusions together. However, there are tactics that can sometimes be used to get through the ordeal with more success. These are in addition to the

exchange-level guidance already given, particularly relating to neutralizing personal attacks.

The following guidelines aim to:

- discourage manipulation by the discussion controller; and

- neutralize attempted manipulation.

Make procedural suggestions

The dominant person will usually be observed by other people (e.g. television viewers or other people at a business meeting). Not all observers will approve of the dominant person's tactics and objectives. The audience is often important.

There is often scope to suggest how the discussion could proceed for the benefit of others.

> E.g. In the example of the dominant committee chairman given above, it might be possible to ask at various points (1) that the key items of the agenda be identified at the start of the meeting, (2) that the approach to a key item be clarified before it is discussed, (3) that the main options for decision be stated as a starting point, (4) that particular people be asked to explain particular points that are relevant to the discussion, and (5) that a full show of hands be taken to get a better picture of current views. All these are reasonable requests helping to produce a more productive meeting. There will be tension but it is hard for the chairman to refuse.

> E.g. In the example of the television interview given above the author might have blocked the personal line of questioning by saying 'My parents and upbringing have nothing to do with the motivation for writing my latest book so there's nothing useful I can say about it. But your viewers might be interested to know the real reasons I wrote the book.' The last point is the suggested direction for the interview.

Discourage interruptions

A common abuse of power in a discussion is to interrupt others. To make this harder, outline your contribution before making it. In a relatively short answer to an interview question this usually means saying how many points you are going to make by saying something like 'There are three ways this happens…' or 'There are two problems with that.'

If interrupted, mention (if possible) what you were trying to explain.

> E.g. 'I am still answering your question. I have mentioned two of the three problems so there is still one to go.'

> E.g. 'There are still some more issues that need to be considered if we are to take a balanced view.'

> E.g. 'Please allow me to finish my main statement and so answer Susan's question.'

Do not get diverted onto a new point before you have finished dealing with the old one.

E.g. 'Please allow me to state the three tactics that have been used before we discuss the evidence on how often they have been used.'

E.g. 'I'll answer your question and then we can discuss your follow on questions.'

E.g. 'I'll answer your question and then we can discuss the justification for my answer.'

Neutralize attempted gotchas

Some interviewers want to make you look bad. The interview is an argument with someone who despises you and controls the conversation according to their rules. In particular, modern news media interviewers often try to get victims to say something that can then be used, perhaps out of context, to attack them further – a 'gotcha'.

In this age of internet video sharing, try to negotiate a deal that gives you access to the full, unedited video for your own use or lets you have your own camera in operation too. This is like a cyclist wearing a helmet-cam or a police officer wearing a bodycam. It gives you evidence of what really happened that can be shared and analysed slowly, patiently, and in detail later on. Slow, patient analysis is good for people who are reasonable and fair but threatening to others. It may discourage use of tricks.

The interviewer may ask the same question in slightly different ways, hoping you will choose words poorly. This repetition looks bad to observers, which is the weakness of this tactic.

- **Tactic:** Repeatedly ask the same question in hope of getting a gotcha.
  Response: 'I have already answered that question and our viewers will be wondering why you keep asking what is really the same question instead of moving on to something fresh. I was hoping to explain a bit more about …'

Another attack tactic is to include a claim that you are a bad person while asking you about it. News media and activists who help them are happy to search through everything an enemy has ever said, written, or done in hope of finding something to use against them. Their back up plan is to report that their victim 'denied' something bad-sounding in a way that suggests everyone thinks the denial is a lie. Here is a useful generic response pattern using a simple contradiction and follow on, with some specific examples.

- **Tactic:** Generic pattern: 'You are a terrible person. What do you say to that?'
  Response: Generic response: 'I am not a terrible person. Your question is mistaken.' Then follow on with useful material.

- **Tactic:** 'You once said that people with no business being in this country should be sent home. Do you accept that was a racist statement?'
  Response: 'I am not a racist. You seem to have misunderstood that statement, perhaps through losing the context. I was referring to the government's policy and the law then and now, which is to identify illegal immigrants and remove them from the country if they have no legally sufficient reason for staying.'

- **Tactic:** 'Many people have been upset by your statement last week. Do you accept that you should not have said what you said?'
  Response: 'What I said was fair and true. No reasonable person who understood it should have been upset. My point was ...'

Some attacks amount to ambushes where the person with control of the conversation introduces new information (e.g. a case, a statistic, a statement) they present as damning and demands a response. They hope to push you into saying something they can use against you or at least make you look ignorant or flustered.

> E.g. A journalist chases after the President waving a photograph of a suffering child and asking what she has to say about it. If the photograph is genuine and shows what it appears to show then there are many levels of management who should have prevented the problem before it becomes a Presidential matter but still the journalist wants answers. The President knows nothing about the case.

> E.g. A TV interviewer is interviewing a Minister about one topic then abruptly switches to a new one saying 'Your colleague, Sir Giles Poshman, says women should be locked in cages. Is he fit to be in government?' The Minister knows nothing of this but senses it is a cynical distortion of something innocent Giles said. The Minister does not want to accuse the interviewer of lying, attack his colleague, or appear to defend the indefensible.

If you already know about the issue then you can respond but in a true ambush you do not have enough to respond at that moment. Avoid responding to something that may be incorrect or misleading.

Typically you will explain that you are not familiar with the details and will get more then say more about the issue. You can then move on to your overall objectives in the area, policies, plans, etc. The ideal response depends on what you have done so far.

> E.g. 'I saw this picture earlier today and I've asked for more information. Clearly this is not government policy and not acceptable. I will say more about it when I have more information. Our plans for the health sector include ...'

> E.g. 'This is not our policy and I'm concerned to see this, but I don't know about the particulars of this case and will get someone to do some research before I say more. Our plans for the health sector include...'

If pushed on why you need to do more research then list some things you want to check first (e.g. the source of the information, the context, the definition of the statistic, the sampling method used, what is already being done). It is tempting to explain that you want to check for fake photographs, quotes out of context, manipulated statistics, or cherry-picked evidence but this would antagonize without helping. If later you find these problems then you can explain them calmly and clearly with detailed evidence.

> E.g. 'I have no knowledge of this but don't think for a moment that Giles wants women to be locked in cages. I will check with him to understand the context but for now I have no comment.'

Case 13: All other participants are uncooperative

In this Case nobody else in the discussion is cooperative. They are all trying to secure an unfair position for themselves and the prospects for constructive progress are poor. This situation calls for largely the same tactics as a one-to-one encounter with an uncooperative person.

However, in this situation the interests of other participants may differ so that they conflict with each other as well as with you. Alternatively, they may all be aligned against you.

The following guidelines add to those suggested for one-to-one encounters with uncooperative people and additionally aim to:

- explore incremental routes to positive change that may achieve some support.

Understand the situation and choose wisely

All the considerations for one-to-one discussions with an uncooperative person are relevant here, but often repeated to cover the various individuals or groups in a large discussion. Complexity can become overwhelming.

Nevertheless, understanding the interests of the various individuals and alliances helps you suggest ways forward.

Test support for incremental changes

In practice, progress is most often made by finding smaller changes that all parties will agree to, happily or otherwise. The incremental approach can produce larger change over a series of negotiations. Creative suggestions may break a deadlock.

Suggest changes and see how people react. This can be more effective if you have some creative suggestions that others have overlooked.

E.g. Suppose someone is complaining because most of the speakers at a planned professional conference are men. The organizers say they posted general requests for speakers to cover the themes they thought would most appeal to the intended audience and most of the volunteers were men. All the speaking slots are filled and all rejected speakers were male. The complainer wants the organizers to reject some male speakers already accepted and recruit only female speakers to replace them. The conversation becomes an ugly battle between those who want to do this and those who want no further action, especially not cancelling men already accepted. Reason and fairness are not winning and there is deadlock.

To make progress, someone needs to suggest creative solutions and some incremental changes. These might include shortening speeches so that more speaking slots can be created, making discussion panels larger, and having a female host to introduce speakers. With some new slots to fill, more female volunteers might be reached by having the complainers seek further volunteers,

and by suggesting new topics that will appeal to female speakers while still being popular with the whole audience.

E.g. Imagine that a company is planning some efficiency improvements but these are resisted by a trade union because the plan might lead to job losses and does not propose increased pay to share the benefit of the changes. The latest meeting includes an independent arbitrator and starts with almost an hour of bad-tempered argument over these two issues. Eventually the arbitrator suggests they discuss a new topic: plans for re-training and re-deployment. The plan proposed by the managers does not address these at all. The union representatives like this topic and the management representatives are less hostile. They feel defensive because they overlooked this when planning but see hope of some acceptance of change by the union. Both sides agree to steps they can each take to make quick progress in this area. It is not the full solution but these are steps in the right direction that everyone can agree to.