



How Do You Deal With Participants Who Are Distracted By Cell Phones/PDAs During Meetings?

The Problem:

It's the ugly side of technology... cell phones, pagers, blackberries, blueberries, strawberries – Oh My! How do we compete with all of these gadgets when we're trying to lead a meeting? What's a meeting facilitator to do???

Try these techniques....

- Bring it up as an issue early and get the group's consensus on a ground rule
- Use facilitation techniques that require participants to walk around or at least remain actively engaged (e.g. affinity diagramming, nominal group technique, etc.)
- Make a point to begin calling on people by name early in the session (sets a tone where participants know they need to pay attention)
- Get the group's agreement on "No PDA multitasking" if you agree to provide a break every hour for everyone to respond to messages as needed
- Get the group's agreement on a penalty for any ringing phones/devices – e.g. violator must sing a tune 😊
- Walk around during the session and stand near any violators
- Pose a question to a violator who has disengaged
- Leave a basket at the front door for everyone to drop their gadget into before they take their seat
- Announce at the start of the meeting that you'll ask anyone on their PDA to step out as needed

Note that there are a variety of techniques that can be used to address this very common problem, and they range in level of assertiveness. The level of assertiveness you use should be determined after weighing several factors (including personalities, seriousness of violations, etc.) The key is to NOT ignore the problem – bring it up with the team and let the group consensus be your guide!

Dana Brownlee is an acclaimed keynote speaker, corporate trainer, and team development consultant. She is President of Professionalism Matters, Inc. a boutique professional development corporate training firm based in Atlanta, GA. She can be reached at danapbrownlee@professionalismmatters.com.