



Dear Chief

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COLUMNIST

DEAR CHIEF: I’m a manager who is having difficulty getting people to stop talking over one another during my team meetings. They do comply with my requests to stop but only after my repeated attempts to verbally break them up. It is very counterproductive and I’m not sure meeting attendees are truly understanding each other’s perspectives and concerns. Any ideas on how I can be more effective in managing their meeting conduct?

FRUSTRATED MANAGER



DEAR FRUSTRATED MANAGER: I do have a suggestion. I first learned this tactic from military academies, and after I tried it a few times, it cured my problem of people cutting each other off in meetings. It involves the use of a tangible item, like a fancy stick, small trophy, or even a symbolic coffee cup. The basic concept is this: When the item is one person’s hands, only that person can speak.

Shhh...you don’t have the stick

Native American Indians have perfected this tactic for centuries by using what they called the Talking Stick. The Talking Stick was an intricately carved, five-foot-tall stick with an Indian name or symbol inscribed or carved on it. Here’s the theory behind it:

Whenever people meet together, the Talking Stick is present. Only the person holding the Talking Stick is permitted to speak. As long as you have the Talking Stick, you alone may speak until you are satisfied that you are understood. Others are not permitted to make their own points, argue, agree or disagree. All they may do is attempt to understand you and then articulate that understanding. They may need to restate your point to make sure you feel understood, or you may just simply feel that they understand.

As soon as you feel understood, it is your obligation to pass the Talking Stick to the next person and then to work to make him feel understood. As he makes his points, you have to listen, restate and empathize until he feels truly understood. Once each of the

parties feels understood, an amazing thing usually happens. Negative energy dissipates, contention evaporates, mutual respect grows, and people become creative. New ideas emerge. Keep in mind, though, to understand does not mean to agree. It just means to be able to see with the other person’s eyes, heart, mind, and spirit.

How do you get started? Find your designated item and begin exercising the tactic during your meetings. Tell attendees to comply or they’ll be politely excused from the meeting.

Using a Talking Stick or other similar item may very well be the solution to your meeting’s communication problems. Try using one and see if it makes a difference!



For an opportunity to have your question, issue or concern addressed in the Dear Chief column, go to www.DearChiefAdvice.com and submit your comments or email them to Jeff@DearChiefAdvice.com.