

How to Stop People From Rambling

By DIANNA BOOHER SEPTEMBER 15, 2020



You run into ramblers everywhere: On a Zoom webinar. In the boardroom. In your training class.

The reasons vary: They have extensive experience. They want to share war stories. They like the limelight. They talk to think. They don't fully understand the topic and what they're trying to say about it. Their nature is to be defensive and argumentative. They're simply inarticulate.

Whatever the reasons for the ramble, the problem is yours.

Yes, you read that right. If you're the leader, the "rambling" problem becomes yours. If it's your meeting, that ramble stands between you and a decision, between you and a "yes" on your project, between you and the next steps.

If the meeting or discussion runs longer than planned because of the rambling, more often than not, you — rather than the ramble — get the blame. Others fault you as the leader for not finishing at the scheduled time.

So How to Bring the Rambler to a Stop?

Start by determining the cause behind the ramble. Is your meeting agenda unclear? Have you posed a vague question? Is the rambler seeking attention or confrontation? Is the rambler a poor communicator in general? Identifying the specific reason for the ramble dictates your options for stopping it.

Option 1: Help the rambler word the question.

If Lana rambles because she's typically inarticulate, she'll be relieved for you to come to her rescue. Break into the ramble like this: "So, let me stop you for a moment. Are you asking if we already have money set aside for this project in this year's budget?"

You'll see a look of relief on Lana's face and get confirmation: "Yes, I guess that's essentially what I'm driving at. If the money's set aside, by all means, let's use it."

After her confirmation that you understand the question, you've regained the floor and can move ahead to other concerns and discussion.

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Option 2: Avoid rewarding and encouraging the ramble with inappropriate body language.

At HR conferences and in training classes, I've listened (with impatience, I might add) to a storyteller wax on and on about great feats he's accomplished to bring a project from the brink of disaster to an astonishing success. Meanwhile, it's perfectly clear that a moderator or facilitator is wanting to shut down the ramble, but can't seem to do so.

The problem? Continued eye contact and/or head nodding, both of which suggest interest and encourage the rambler to keep talking. Let your body language do the intervention. Break eye contact. Glance at others around the room waiting their turn to speak up. Stop nodding approval.

Option 3: Acknowledge the comment and call for the question.

You may be forced to bypass subtlety in stopping the rambler. When the rambler goes on and on in storytelling or in navel-gazing reflections, Option 3 can send a loud message. After rambling Glen delivers another long-winded opinion, simply respond with: "Was that a question? Or just a comment?"

The underlying message: "Do we need to address something here or can we move on?" Glen will realize that his game is up, that others are aware of his grandstanding.

The rambler may need compassionate help (Option 1) or a kick in the seat of the pants (Option 3), depending on either their lack of skill or their showoff nature. Help them whichever way that works.



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Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 48 books, published in 62 foreign-language editions. She helps organizations to communicate clearly and leaders to expand their influence by a strong executive presence — and often by their own published book. Her latest books include *Faster, Fewer, Better Emails*; *Communicate Like a Leader*; *What MORE Can I Say?*, *Creating Personal Presence: and Communicate With Confidence*. National Media such as Good Morning America, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg,

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