

## The UNDER-PARTICIPANT:

I have nothing to add!



### The Challenge

- While some people speak up, others sit in silence.
- When asked if he or she has something to say, the under-participant declines.
- Sometimes an entire group will sit back and say nothing.

### What's Really Going On

- Some people feel insecure about the quality of their ideas.
- Others may feel that their ideas aren't going to be heard or, worse, fear that they'll be rebuked for speaking out.
- Participants may be afraid of saying something inappropriate in front of peers or superiors.
- The presence of a senior person may intimidate participants and cause them to shut down.
- The group's over-participants may be shutting down the quiet people.
- Some people process information more slowly and the discussion moves on before they are prepared to speak.



### Facilitator Pitfalls

- Assuming that quiet people have nothing to add.
- Sticking with a large group format for most discussions.
- Not setting norms to create safety and comfort at the meeting.
- Leading a discussion in which only the high participants have a voice.
- Forgetting to invite quiet people into conversations.
- Not providing time for individual thought.
- Failing to find out if the presence of certain people might have a negative effect on participation.

## Intervention Strategies

- Coach senior people to focus on asking questions or offering “What if. . .” suggestions and hold their ideas until the end of the discussion to avoid shutting down participation.
- Design the meeting around techniques that create safety and get everyone involved. These include having people talk to a partner before speaking in the large group, use small groups to generate ideas and find areas of common agreement, have participants journal thoughts before speaking, invite people to write ideas on flip charts around the room, etc.
- Help the group create targeted norms that encourage open participation by asking:
  - How can we make sure that everyone participates and no one dominates?
  - What conditions or assurances encourage people to speak freely at this meeting?
  - What are those folks who always have a lot to contribute willing to do to ensure everyone’s ideas are heard?
- Maintain eye contact with the under-participants so they know they’re not forgotten and are always welcome to add their views.
- Call on quiet people by name, especially if their body language indicates they may have something to say.
- Find nonthreatening roles for quiet people, like recorders or timekeepers, to make them feel valued.
- Encourage under-participants by thanking them for participating.
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**TIP: Facilitators always need to get input from everyone in a group to ensure that final decisions have the full support of all members.**

