



# Let's TALK



| DEALING WITH  
DISRUPTORS

# How to deal with bad-faith disruptors

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Civil discourse is a powerful learning tool, which gives you practice engaging with other viewpoints in a constructive way. Our [Leader Moderation Guide](#) provides you with in-depth advice about how to de-escalate a discussion that has become so heated that it is no longer productive. But what happens when someone attends one of your meetings, not to participate, but to shut it down?

Unfortunately, there is no magic panacea for this situation. In some cases, you may be able to de-escalate the situation and allow your group to return to productive discussion after such a disruption. In others, you might need to stop the meeting altogether and reschedule with your group members.

We hope that this guide helps you to navigate this circumstance so that your Let's Talk group can move on in a productive way.

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## STEP 1: ENGAGE OR DISENGAGE

When your group's meeting is interrupted by someone who wishes to shut your conversation down, you can choose to: (A) Engage the Disruptor or (B) Disengage from the Disruptor. The path you take depends on your sense of the disruptor's tone and whether you think they would be interested in a discussion.

### Option A: Engage the Disruptor

Should you choose to engage them, you can address the disruptor and ask them about why they are interrupting the meeting. You might ask them questions like: *Why are you trying to shut us down? What do you think we stand for? What, specifically, do you not like about this group?*

When they respond to your questions, listen to their answers and then try to reiterate the mission statement of your group to the disruptor, emphasizing the club's nonpartisan position and stating that this is a space for everyone to air their views in a respectful way. You can say to the disruptor that it is this group's belief that minds are not changed by cancellation or yelling — they are changed by listening and engaging.

If engaging the disruptor in a conversation about your group's values successfully de-escalated the disruptor's emotional temperature and resulted in productive discussion, try to fold the rest of the group into the conversation.

You can do this by inviting the disruptor to join you and see what a Let's Talk meeting is really like before deciding to shut it down. You can either invite the other group members into the conversation you were having with the disruptor about the group's mission and goals, or you and your group can dive back into the conversation you were having before the disruptor came onto the scene. You might even invite the

disruptor to attend a future meeting! Do whichever feels most natural in the moment.

### Option B: Disengage from the Disruptor

If your group is interrupted by a disruptor who refuses to engage in any conversation about their own reasoning for shutting you down, then you may need to stop the meeting and reschedule.

De-escalation is only as successful as the disruptor allows it to be, and if they will not talk with you, it is better to cancel and reschedule the meeting than to allow the disruptor to ruin your conversation's productivity. In the end, you are the guardian of the trust which your group members have placed in each other to engage in discussion compassionately without snap judgement or insults.

If the disruptor will not be pulled into conversation and seeks to engage you and your group members in a battle of insults and angry dialogue, then the disruptor threatens to destroy that trust. In that event, it is much better to stop the meeting and reconvene at another time when you can talk with your group members about how to handle a similar situation in the future.

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## STEP 2: RECAP WITH THE GROUP AT ANOTHER DATE ABOUT HOW THEY FELT THE EVENT WAS HANDLED

Events like these can be very disturbing, and they may raise some serious concerns among your dedicated group members. Keep in mind that attending civil discourse meetings is a counter-cultural action and it requires bravery. Occasions in which disruptors make the discussion space into a contentious and anxiety-producing space can jeopardize the progress that you have made with your Let's Talk members if you do not address the event after the fact.

Therefore, we strongly advise that you meet with your members after the event with the disruptor and check in with them about how they are feeling. It's important that you invite them to engage in a conversation about the effect that this occasion may have had on the way they think about your Let's Talk group. Allow them to express their feelings to other group members and for everyone to air their views. Then, be sure to reiterate your group's goals and the group's commitment to non-partisanship, ideological tolerance, and compassionate listening and discussion.

During this meeting, check in with your group members to see how they thought the event was handled. What could you as a Let's Talk leader have done differently? If you chose to engage the disruptor, what did your group members think went well about your de-escalation tactics? If you chose to stop the meeting and reschedule, how did the group members feel about that decision? Hearing their feedback will help you better handle similar situations and it will also help your group members to feel included in the solution to any more events like it in the future.



*What could you as a Let's Talk leader have done differently? If you chose to engage the disruptor, what did your group members think went well about your de-escalation tactics? If you chose to stop the meeting and reschedule, how did the group members feel about that decision?*





## The FSN Team is here for you!

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We want to hear about any issues you have with your [Let's Talk](#) group, including attempts to cancel or silence you. If this happens to you, please reach out to [students@thefire.org](mailto:students@thefire.org) and we would be happy to schedule a call with you to brainstorm solutions for the future. Please stay in touch!