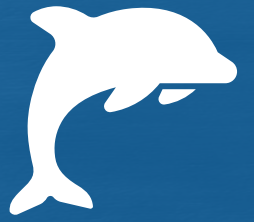

Public Engagement is a Whole Different Animal

How Different Personalities Engage in Planning Processes

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Jillian Dierks

McCORMICK TAYLOR

October 13, 2025

So what I hear when I'm being
yelled at is people caring loudly at me.

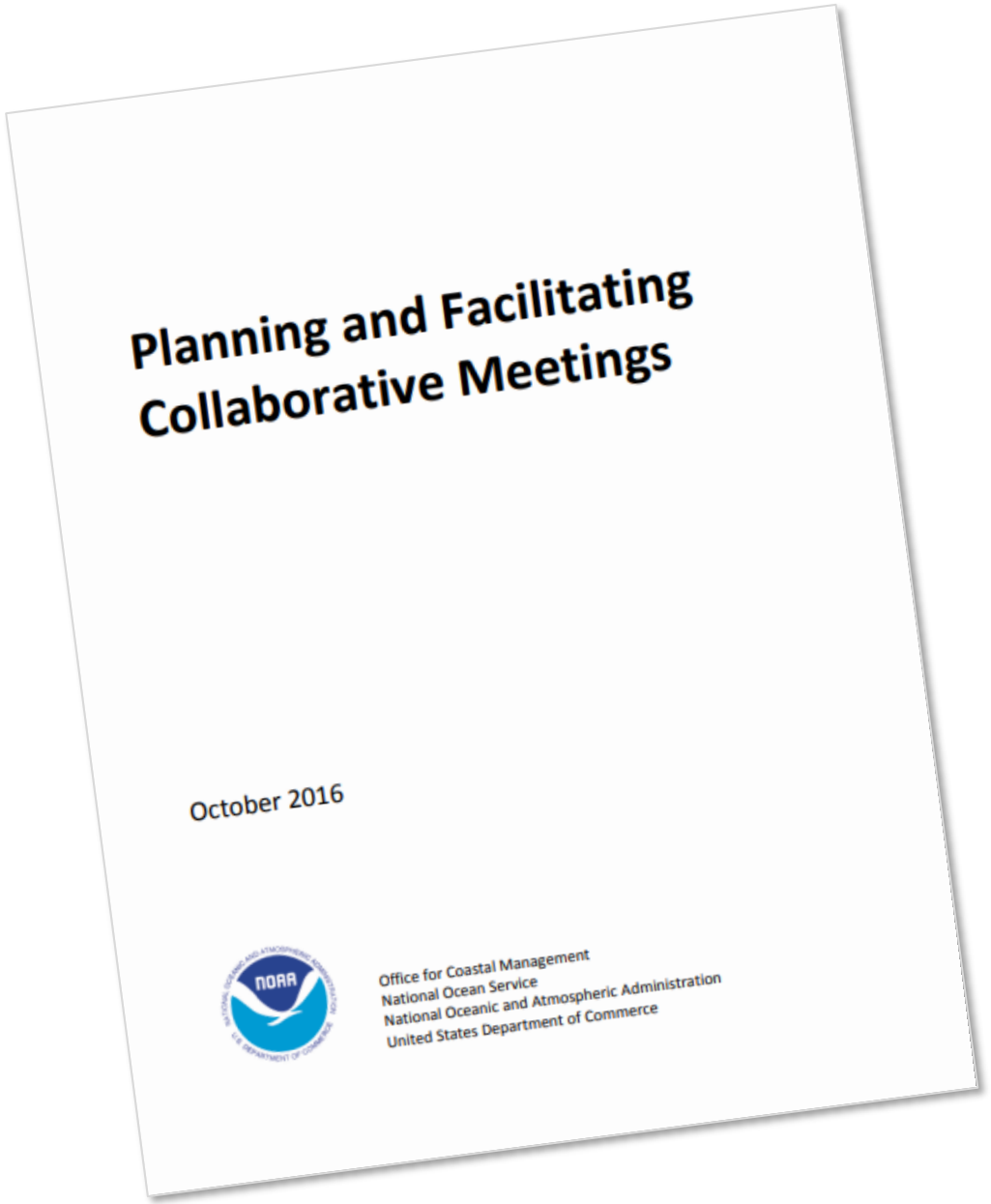
Why Personalities Matter in Engagement

- Public meetings bring together a **wide range of participants**- some quiet, some outspoken, some disruptive.
- Behaviors shape outcomes- **recognizing patterns** helps us respond productively.
- Planners must manage difficult behaviors in ways that maintain **trust** and **encourage participation**.

Why Personalities Matter in Engagement

- **Today we will cover:**
  - Profiles of common personalities you may encounter
  - A framework for understanding motivations
  - Practice applying facilitation strategies
  - Group discussion and takeaways

**No sea creatures were harmed in the creation of this presentation.*

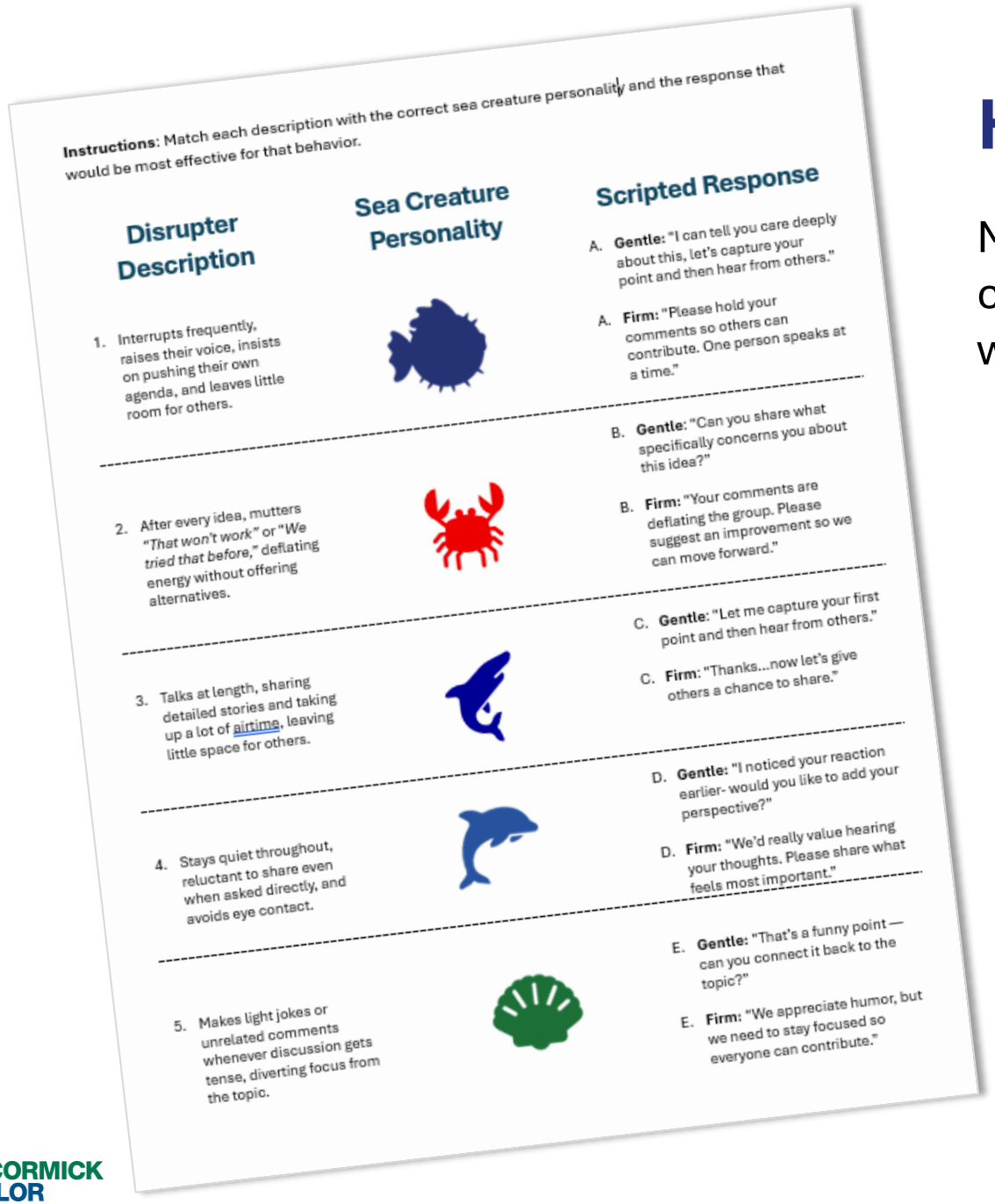


- Much of the content and framework shared in this session draws from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Office for Coastal Management *Planning and Facilitating Collaborative Meetings* guide.

- We've adapted those materials to reflect real-world public engagement scenarios planners encounter in practice.

https://coast.noaa.gov/data/digitalcoast/pdf/planning-and-facilitating-collaborative-meetings.pdf

Common Personalities



Instructions: Match each description with the correct sea creature personality and the response that would be most effective for that behavior.

Disrupter Description	Sea Creature Personality	Scripted Response
1. Interrupts frequently, raises their voice, insists on pushing their own agenda, and leaves little room for others.		A. **Gentle:** "I can tell you care deeply about this, let's capture your point and then hear from others." A. **Firm:** "Please hold your comments so others can contribute. One person speaks at a time."
2. After every idea, mutters *"That won't work"* or *"We tried that before,"* deflating energy without offering alternatives.		B. **Gentle:** "Can you share what specifically concerns you about this idea?" B. **Firm:** "Your comments are deflating the group. Please suggest an improvement so we can move forward."
3. Talks at length, sharing detailed stories and taking up a lot of airtime, leaving little space for others.		C. **Gentle:** "Let me capture your first point and then hear from others." C. **Firm:** "Thanks...now let's give others a chance to share."
4. Stays quiet throughout, reluctant to share even when asked directly, and avoids eye contact.		D. **Gentle:** "I noticed your reaction earlier- would you like to add your perspective?" D. **Firm:** "We'd really value hearing your thoughts. Please share what feels most important."
5. Makes light jokes or unrelated comments whenever discussion gets tense, diverting focus from the topic.		E. **Gentle:** "That's a funny point — can you connect it back to the topic?" E. **Firm:** "We appreciate humor, but we need to stay focused so everyone can contribute."

HANDOUT INSTRUCTIONS

Match each description with the correct sea creature personality and the response that would be most effective for that behavior

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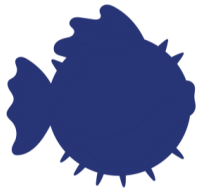


TALKATIVE BLOWFISH

- Chatty, assertive ‘people person
- Overly talkative (almost compulsively) and rambling
- May be enthusiastic, want to show off, or well-informed and want to use their knowledge.
- Dominate the ‘floor time’ at the expense of others

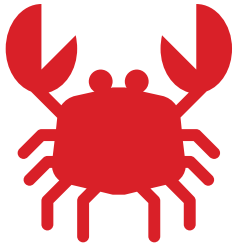
TACTICS

Listen actively:
I’d like to capture all your points on the easel chart and then get the other participants’ feedback as well.

Label sidetracks and interrupt tactfully:
Blowfish? Blowfish? Is this comment related to what we’re discussion or should it go into the parking lot?

Reflect what you see:
Blowfish, you are adept at expressing your thoughts and ideas. I appreciate your enthusiasm for this topic.

Redirect the behavior:
Thank you! Now let’s hear from someone else.
Hold that thought for now, and let’s let Clam offer their thoughts.



COMPLAINING CRAB

- Passive and task-focused, and want to get the job done
- Often motivated by perfection
- Object to everything, asserting that ideas proposed will not work
- May deflate optimism others express and block others from accomplishing goals
- May feel powerless or refuse to bear responsibility for an imperfect solution

TACTICS

Stay Neutral:
I know you value the quality of solutions you develop.

Ask specific, clarifying questions:
Can you describe the reason this solution is flawed? Is there a way we can improve it?

Reflect what you see:
I bet you have high expectations for this process, and you seem dissatisfied with these ideas.

Redirect the behavior:
Let me capture your concern so we can move on to the next issue. That's a unique way of seeing things, Crab. Otter, what do you think about that?

INDECISIVE OCTOPUS

- Perfectionist, passive, and task-focused
- May be afraid of being wrong, disagreeing with others, or going on record
- Becomes torn over choices, trying to find the perfect solution instead of the best choice
- Might be blind to logic and reason by feelings about themselves, their opinions, or the impact of those opinions on others

TACTICS

Ask questions to let them process information:
Tell us what else you need to know to make a decision.

Paraphrase their comments so they hear it in new words:
What I hear you saying is X.
Here is a list of the agreed upon options. Which do you think is the best?

Reflect what you see:
I can tell you are carefully weighing the options. You're having difficulty making a decision on this issue.

Redirect the behavior:
There are no perfect decisions. Which one would you select as the best possible choice under the circumstances with the available information?

SHY CLAM

- Quiet, passive, and task-focused
- Wants to get it right, but may be reluctant or afraid to express their ideas in a group

TACTICS

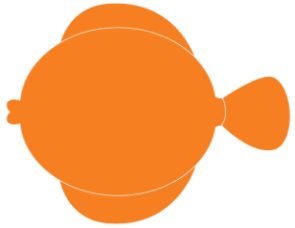
Communicate individually:
Clam, do you have any points to add to the discussion?

Allow time to answer:
Please let Clam respond. Clam has the floor.

Provide anonymous input methods:
Please write your answer to this question on an index card.

Reflect what you see:
I noticed that you leaned forward when that was mentioned. Do you have something to add?

Describe the impact:
We want to understand your perspective on this. Please share what you consider important.



APATHETIC FLOUNDER

- Passive person and wants everyone to get along
- May by uninterested in the topic or not comfortable sharing their perspectives
- Not very engaged in group discussions but may say more during breaks
- May be introverted, an exceptional listener, deeply reflective with good ideas, or simply detached from the subject

TACTICS

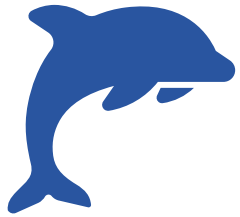
Communicate individually:
Flounder, please share your perspective on this topic.

Paraphrase comments:
Flounder, if I heard you correctly, your idea is…

Provide anonymous input methods:
Please write your answer to this question on an index card.

Reflect what you see:
Flounder, I'm guessing you took the time to participate because you want to see how this issue is resolved.

Describe the impact:
We are interested in your perspective on these solutions. The solutions that are selected will be more complete if all interests are considered.



DIVERTING DOLPHIN

- Assertive and people-focused
- Entertains the group to keep tension down
- Wants everyone to be comfortable and understand their contributions
- May divert attention from the discussion to focus attention on themselves
- Can play a constructive role when group discussions become tense

TACTICS

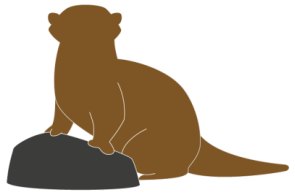
Follow humorous remarks with serious ones:
Does someone have something to add related to the topic?

Relate the comment to discussion:
Dolphin, can you connect that input to our topic?

Paraphrase to refocus:
If I understand your point, you are trying to express the idea that…

Reflect what you see:
I appreciate how your humor is keeping the tension down.

Describe the impact:
We need to keep everyone focused and on topic to accomplish our task today.



EAGER SEA OTTER

- Passive "people person" and wants everyone to get along
- Very agreeable, overly positive, optimistic, reasonable, sincere, and supportive
- Aim to please those nearby – by always saying yes, for example – and seek approval by giving approval
- May overcommit or be unreliable

TACTICS

Ask probing questions to make honesty easy:
What needs to be done? How long will it take?

Ask specific questions:
Do you have any other ideas about how we can do this?

Paraphrase so they are aware of what they said:
Did I hear you say that [your own words to summarize their point]?

Reflect what you see:
You have committed to some big ideas and tasks. [Cite examples]

Describe the impact:
If you volunteer for too much, it may delay forward progress.

Redirect the behavior:
I'm sensing some concern about some of these ideas overly ambitious. What do others think?

DOMINATING SHARK

- Focused on efficiency and accomplishing the task, while keeping control
- May be dominating and might try to intimidate and bully others

TACTICS

Be firm and friendly, not threatening:
I can see you care deeply. I'll capture your comments in the parking lot. Let's use a round robin to hear from others.

Listen actively:
Thank you for your knowledge. Your perspective is important to consider. [Another name], how does your perspective compare to Shark's?

Reflect what you see:
You are having such strong reactions that [explain what you see/hear].

Describe the impact:
Other participants' excitement for this process is being deflated.

Redirect the behavior:
Remember the ground rules – one person speaks at a time. We'd like to hear from someone else. [Another name] what do you think?

ARGUMENTATIVE JELLYFISH

- Task-focused and aggressive
- Confrontational and want to finish the job their way
- Tend to be blunt and argumentative
- Find debating and intellectual games challenging and rewarding

TACTICS

Stay neutral:
Jellyfish, that's an interesting perspective.

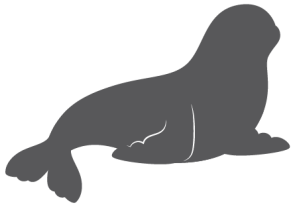
Paraphrase with patient statements:
You have a concern about the proposed solution. Let's break it down into understandable parts.

Acknowledge positive contributions:
Thank you for that suggestion. Let me capture that for reference.

Reflect what you see:
Please remember our ground rules and be respectful of other perspectives.

Describe the impact:
Please recognize that your response may frustrate others and compromise their ability to contribute..

Redirect the behavior:
Let's move on, and I ask you all to be respectful and remember the ground rules before you speak.



ARROGANT SEA LION

- Assertive and need the group to accept their expertise
- Believe they have more credibility than has been acknowledged
- Want everyone to understand and agree with them
- May use credentials, age, length of service to disparage an idea
- May appear condescending and make others feel like there is no point in speaking

TACTICS

Listen actively:
Thank you for your expertise. Let me capture that.

Ping pong to other experts:
[Another name], can you build on what Sea Lion had to say.

Acknowledge positive contributions:
Thank you for that suggestion. Let me capture that for reference.

Reflect what you see:
You are an expert in the area. Is your point [paraphrase the comments]?

Describe the impact:
Remember that we need to hear from everyone in the group in our allotted time.

Redirect the behavior:
Thank you for your views. Now, I'd like to hear from others.

Join at menti.com | use code 7640 2554

Mentimeter

Which disruptive personality do you see most?

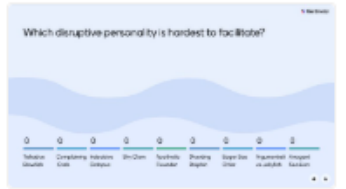
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Talkative Blowfish	Complaining Crab	Indecisive Octopus	Shy Clam	Apathetic Flounder	Diverting Dolphin	Eager Sea Otter	Argumentative Jellyfish	Arrogant Sea Lion

CM

Menti

Disruptive Personalities ...

Choose a slide to present



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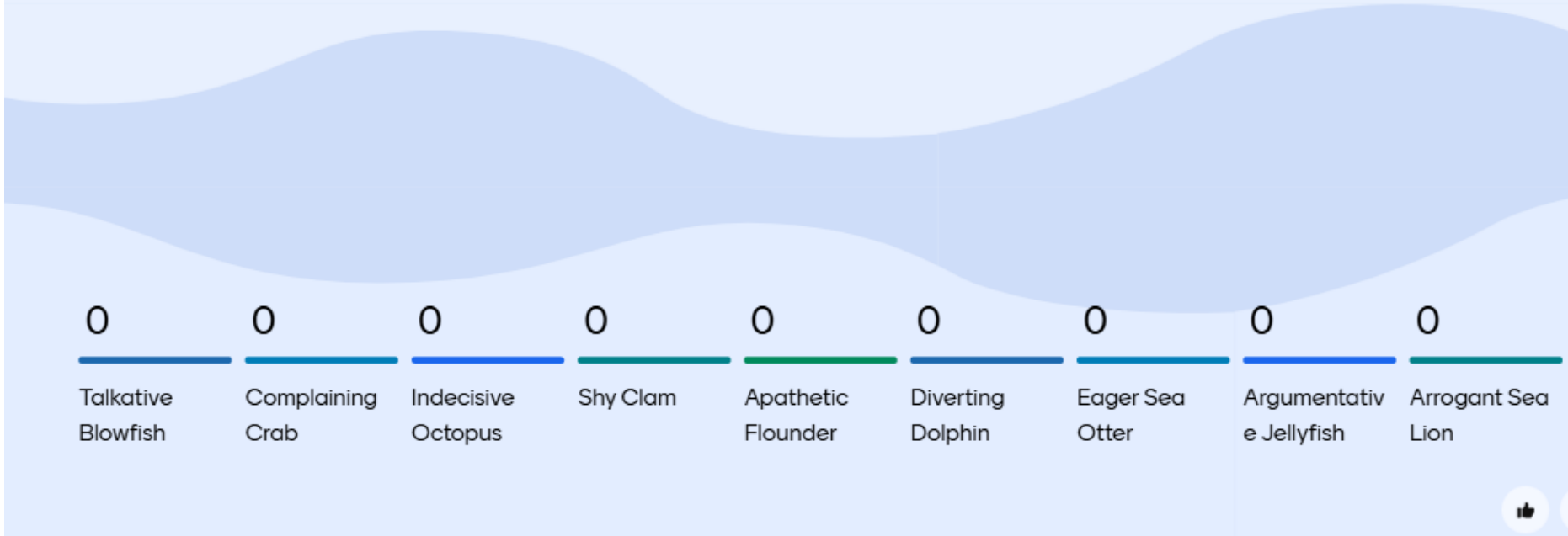
Mentimeter

Which disruptive personality is hardest to facilitate?



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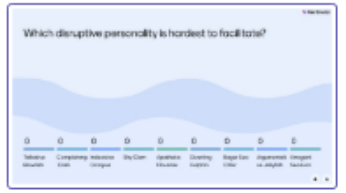
Choose a slide to present



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HANDOUT KEY

Disrupter Description	Sea Creature Personality	Scripted Response
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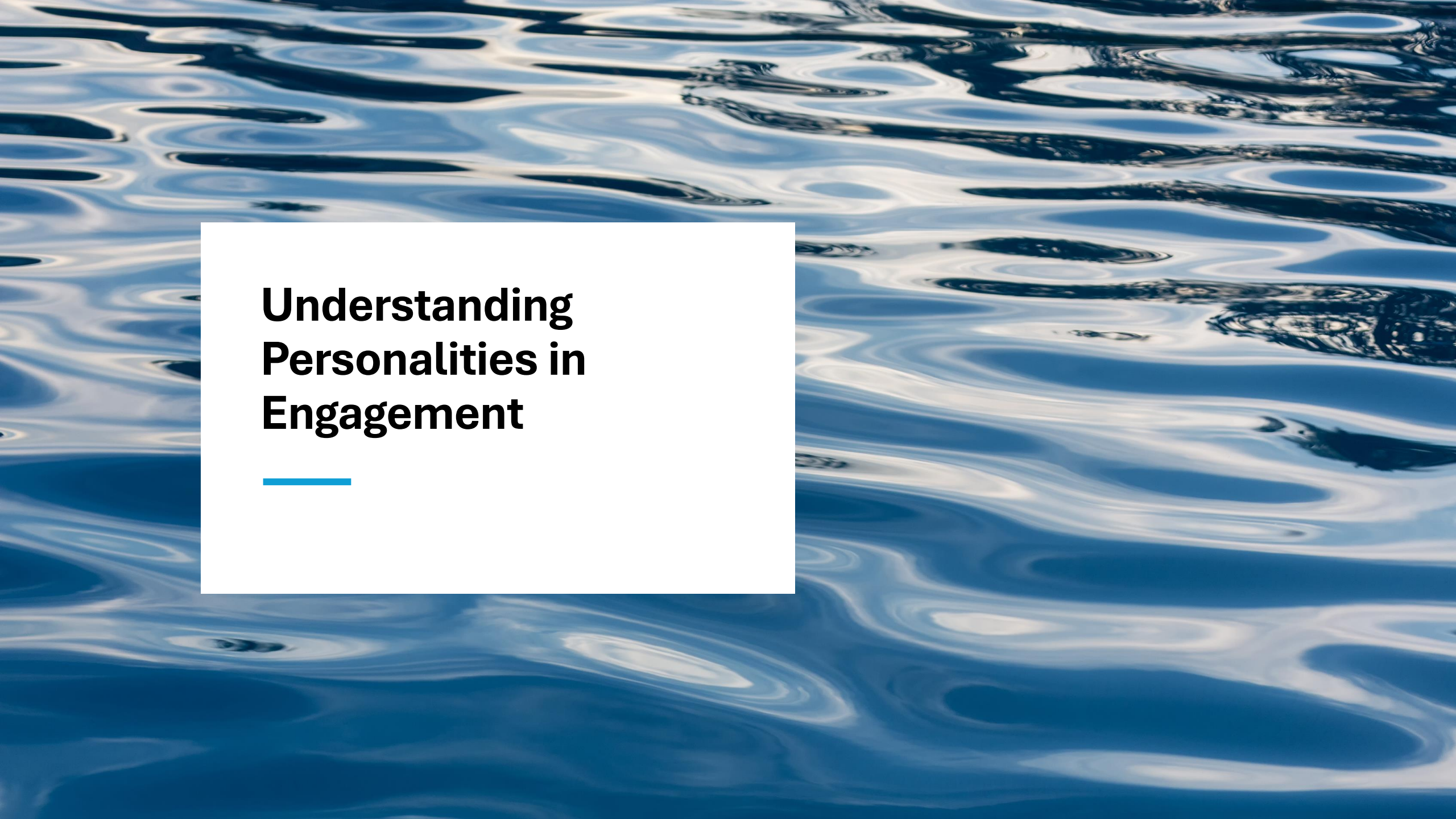


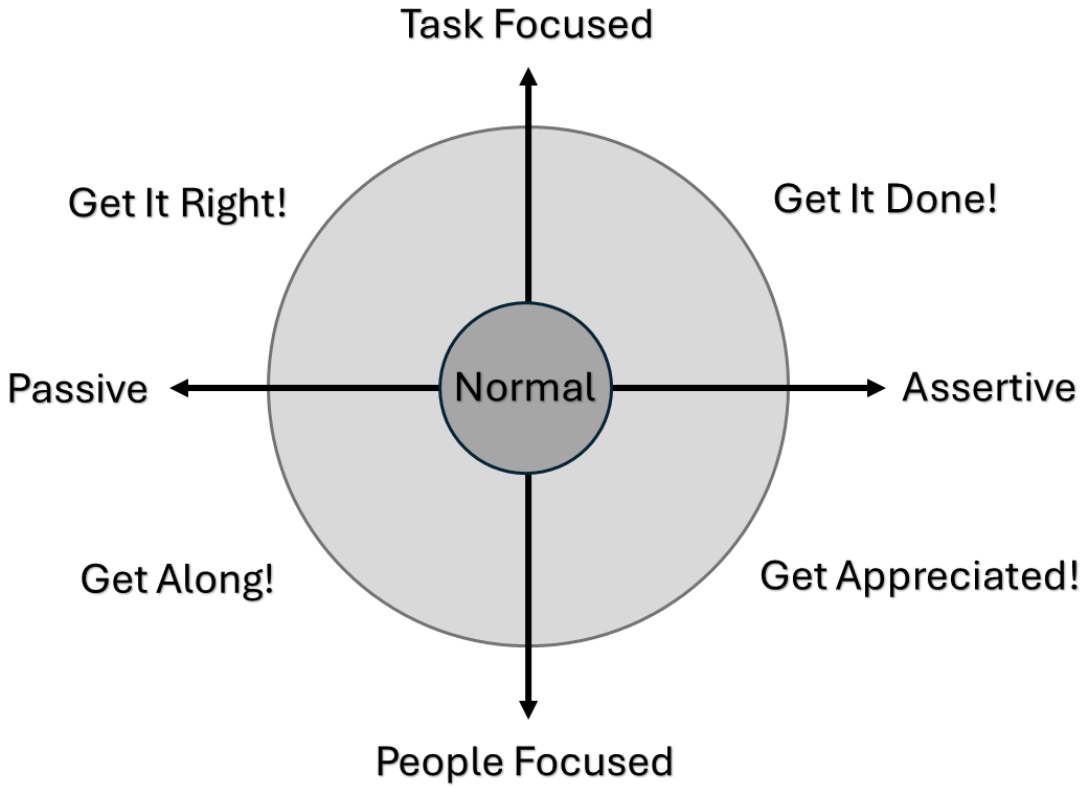
Understanding Personalities in Engagement

Mapping the Waters:
Task Focused vs. People Focused & Passive vs. Assertive

Most disruptive personalities we encounter in engagement can be mapped on two axes:

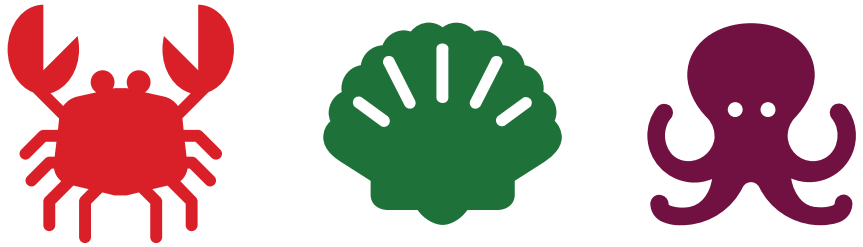
- **Task-focused vs. People-focused**
- **Assertive vs. Passive**

This framework helps us anticipate motivations and respond constructively, instead of reacting in the moment.



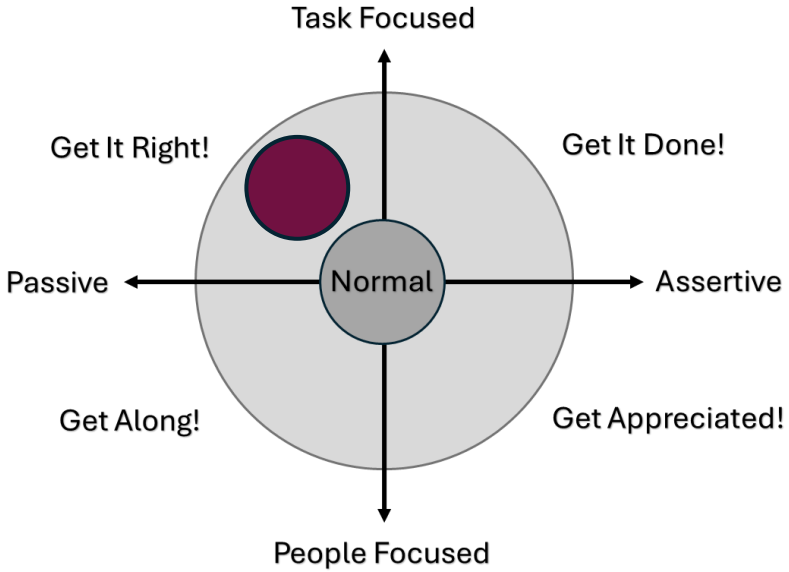
Adapted from Brinkman (1994)

Quadrant 1: Task-Focused + Passive



- These participants want to get it right, but they hesitate.
  - **Crabs** complain because they want perfection.
  - **Clams** stay silent out of fear of being wrong.
  - **Octopuses** keep reaching for the perfect decision.

- With them, reassurance and gentle prompting matter. Try:
  - ***'Let's capture your concern on the chart so it isn't lost.'***
  - ***'Clammy, I noticed you leaned forward earlier - what are you thinking?'***

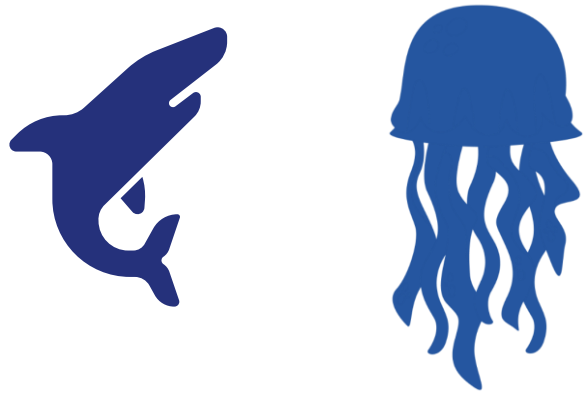


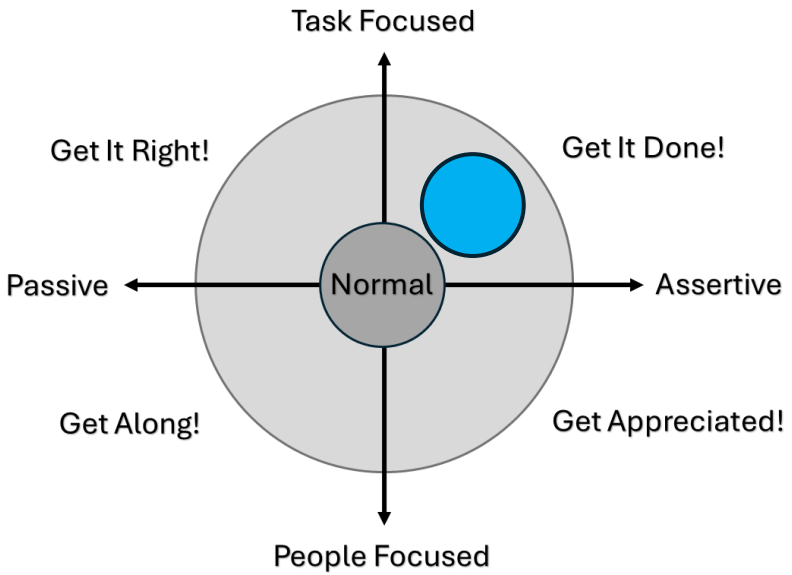
Quadrant 2: Task-Focused + Assertive

- These are your **Sharks** and **Jellyfish**. They're driven by efficiency and control. Their goal: get things done, and get them done their way

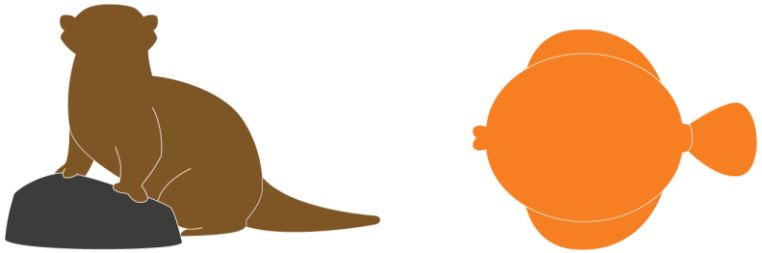
- With these participants, you need to establish trust that the task will be accomplished while making space for other voices.

- Interventions here often sound like: ***'Hold that thought, let's hear from others before we move forward.'***

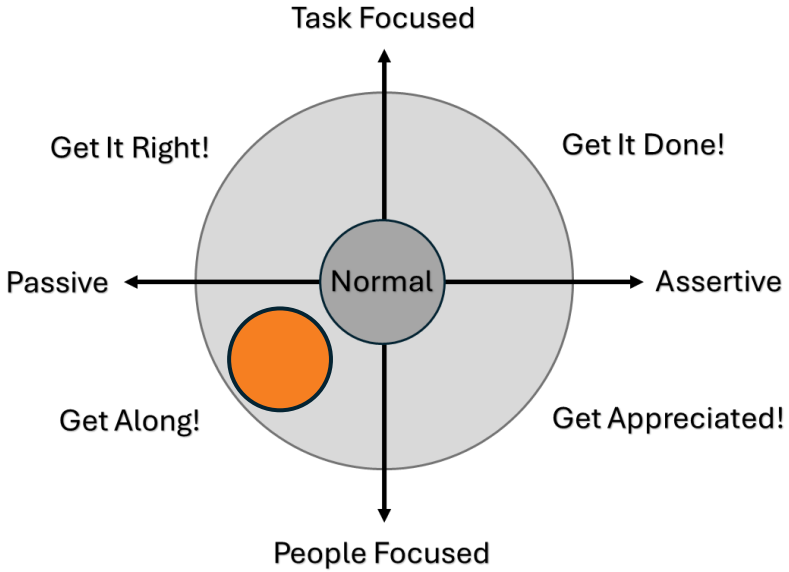




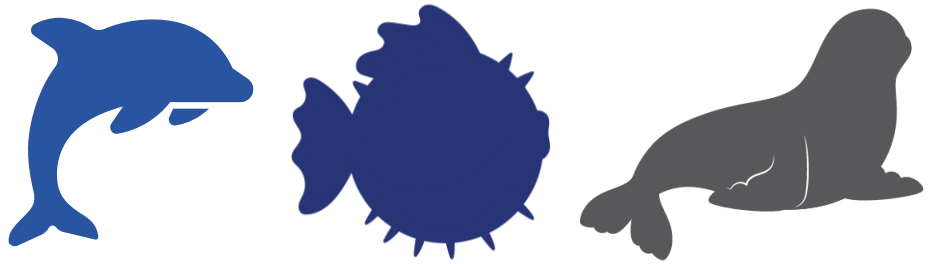
Quadrant 3: People-Focused + Passive



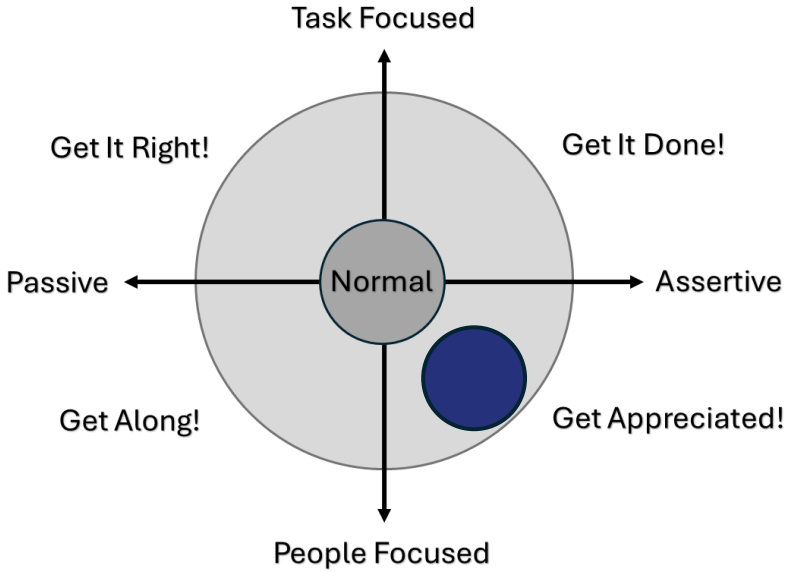
- These are your agreeable, go-with-the-flow types. They just want everyone to get along
  - **Otters** are supportive, maybe *too* supportive, overcommitting without follow-through.
  - **Flounders** disengage or stay quiet
- The facilitator's role is to probe gently and check for realistic commitments. Example: ***'That's a great offer - do you have the capacity to take it on?'***



Quadrant 4: People-Focused + Assertive

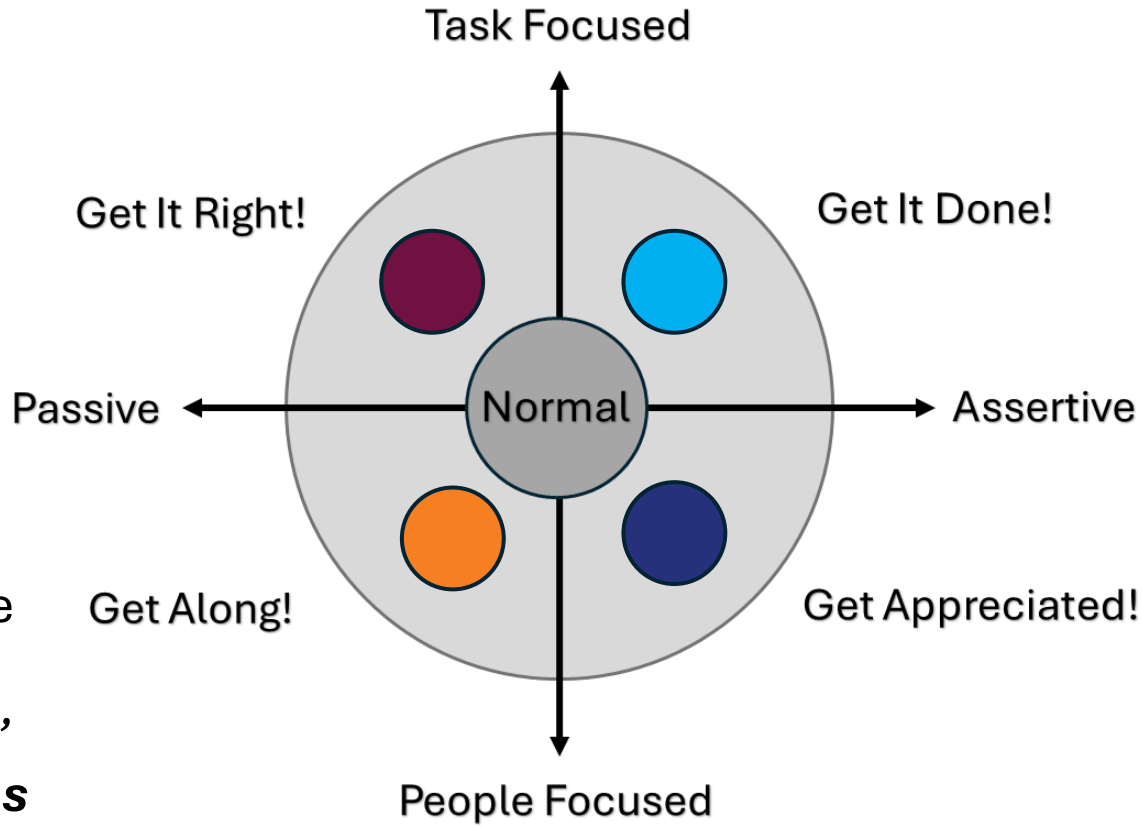


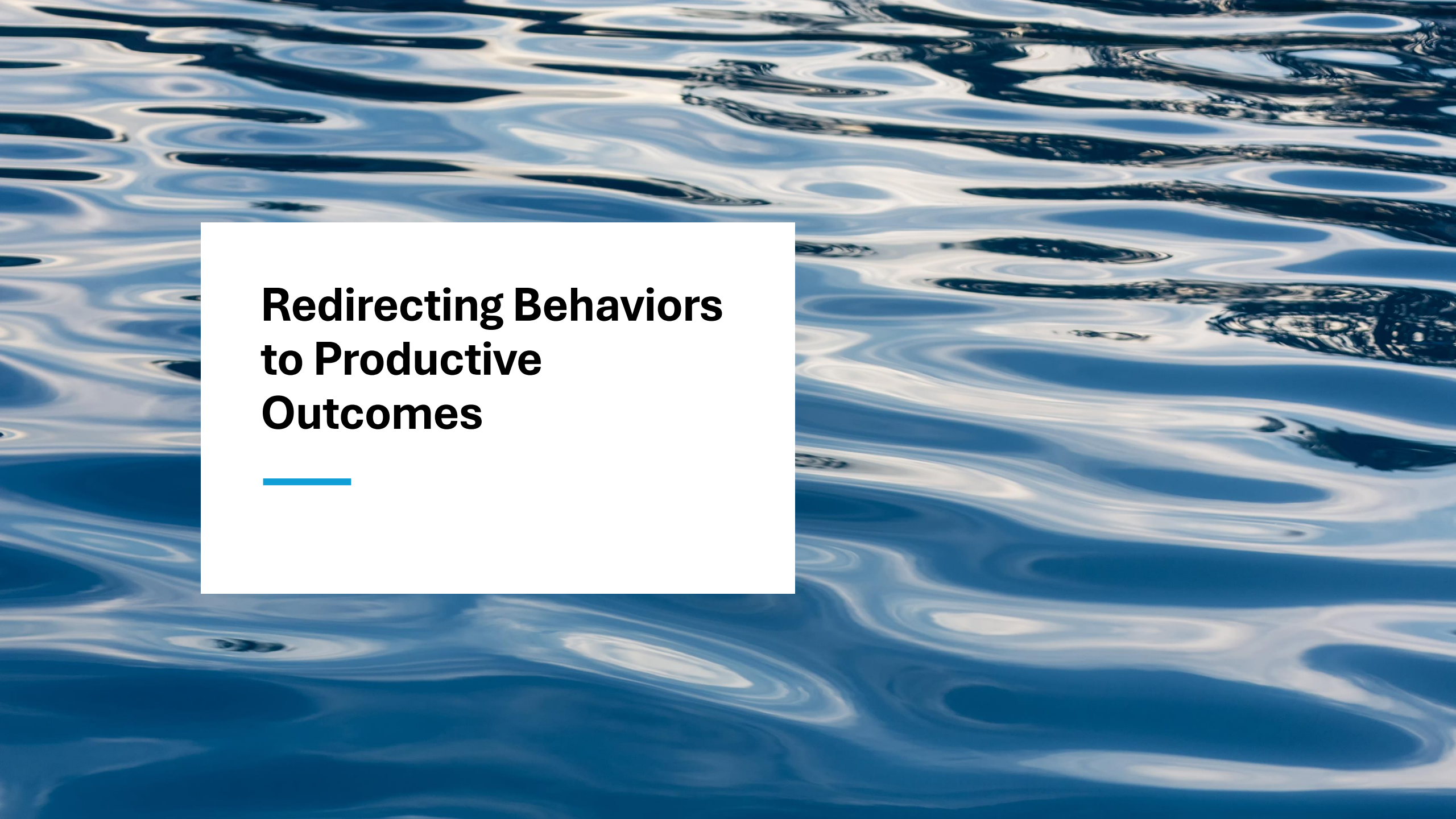
- These are your entertainers, talkers, and experts. They want attention and recognition.
  - **Dolphins** joke to keep the mood light.
  - **Blowfish** dominate airtime.
  - **Sea Lions** flash their expertise.
- The strategy: acknowledge their contributions, then redirect to others. Example: **'Thank you for your expertise, now let's hear from someone else'**



Takeaways

- The point isn't to label people, but to recognize patterns.
- When we see what motivates behavior, we can tailor our facilitation response.
- Instead of thinking: ***'Ugh, another Shark,'*** we can think: ***'This is someone who cares about efficiency. How can I honor that without letting them dominate?'***





Redirecting Behaviors to Productive Outcomes

When to Intervene

- An intervention is an interruption.
- Not every disruption needs one- sometimes issues resolve themselves.
- Before stepping in, ask yourself:
  - Is the problem serious?
  - Will it go away by itself?
  - Is it jeopardizing the outcome?
  - Will my intervention be more disruptive than the behavior?

The 3-Step Intervention Strategy

01

Hold up a mirror – neutrally describe what's happening.

02

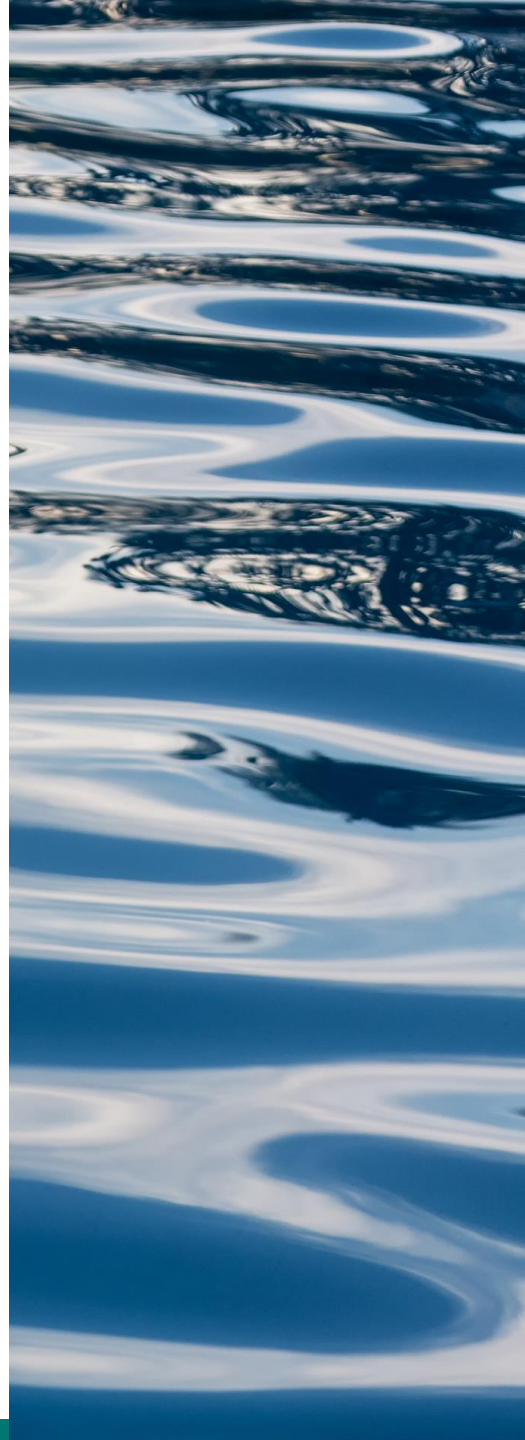
State the impact – explain how it affects the group (optional if it may raise tension).

03

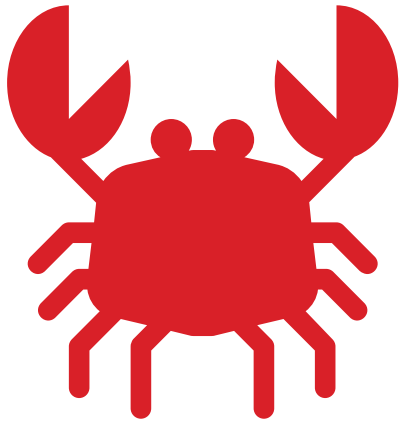
Redirect – move the group back to the agenda or another voice.

Examples in Action

1. Mirror:	“I hear you have a lot of strong points.”
2. Impact:	“Others haven’t had a chance to share yet.”
3. Redirect:	“Let’s hear one perspective from each person.”



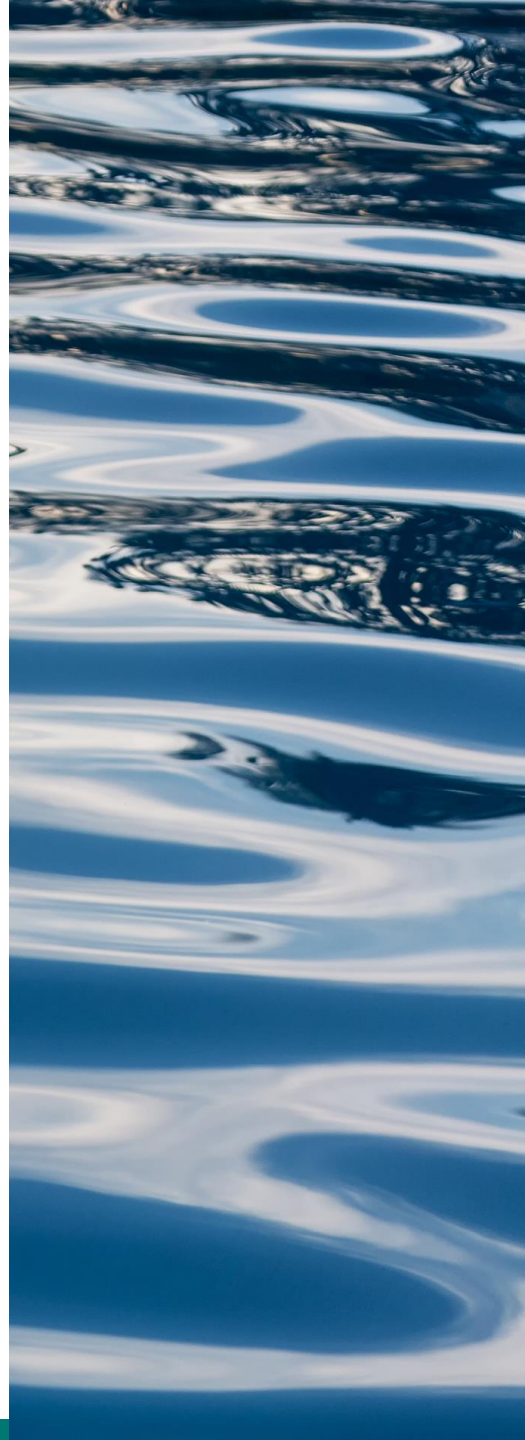
Examples in Action

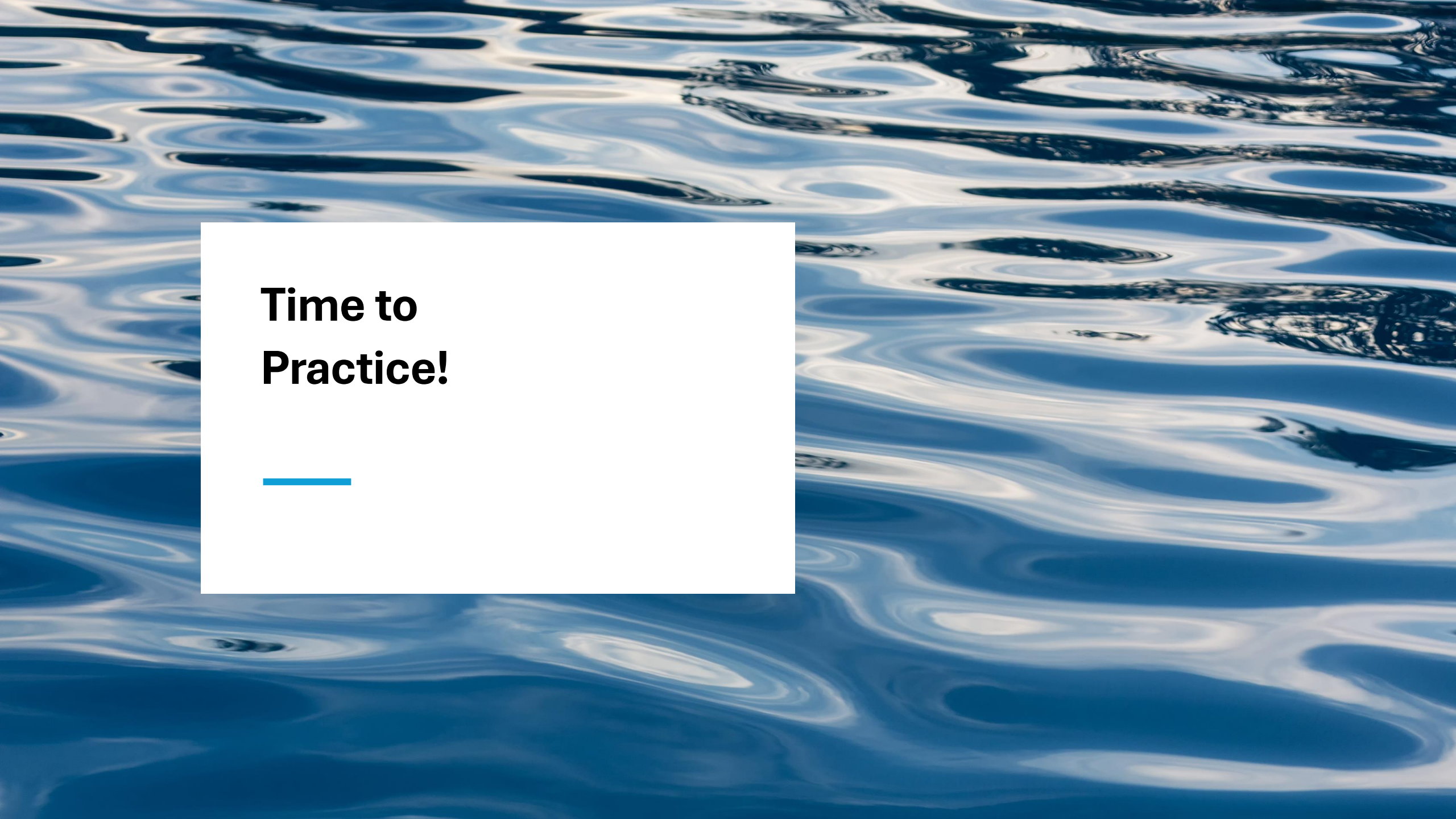


1. Mirror: "I notice you've raised concerns with each idea."

2. Impact: "That's making it hard for the group to see positives."

3. Redirect: "Could you suggest one improvement so we can capture it?"

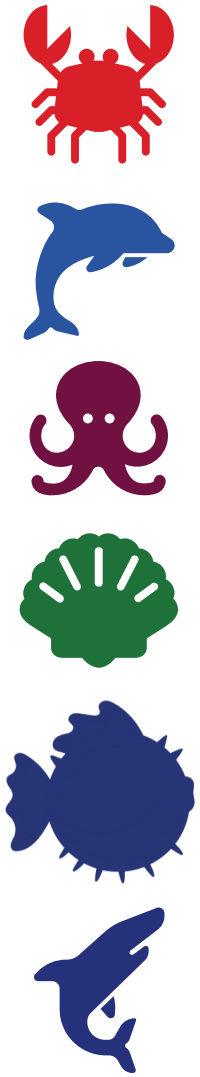




Time to Practice!

Instructions

- **Divide into groups of four**
- **Take turns having one person in the group be the Role-Player.**
  - Draw a card and read the lines on it aloud, as if you're in a public meeting.
  - Stay in character for about 20–30 seconds.
- **Everyone else listens and observes their behavior.**
  - What type is being played: Shark, Crab, Blowfish, Clam, Octopus, or Dolphin?
- **Intervene.**
  - The first person to identify the personality practices an intervention.
  - Use the 3 steps:
    - **Mirror** (describe what's happening)
    - **Impact** (name why it matters)
    - **Redirect** (move the group back on track).
- **Debrief quickly.**
  - Did the intervention work?
  - What else could you try?



Hey, Leslie. It's Leslie. Hang in there. I love you. Bye.

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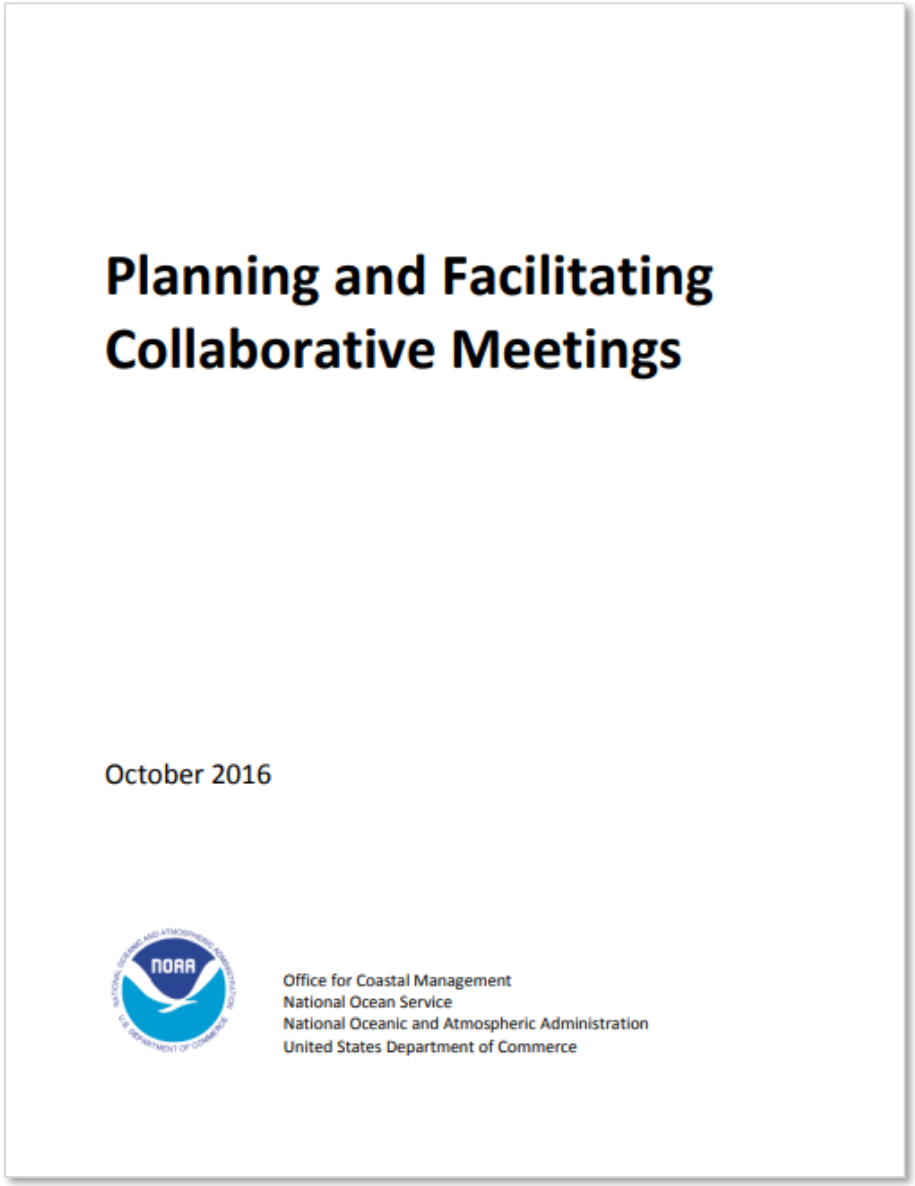

https://coast.noaa.gov/data/digitalcoast/pdf/planning-and-facilitating-collaborative-meetings.pdf

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