



# The Pooh Plan

## Dealing with your group's raging Rabbit

By Stephanie R. Reck, editor

So, I'm sitting on my couch with my little kid, and he's totally sucked into the Winnie the Pooh video he's watching. I'm just idly scratching his back and dozing, waiting for Pooh Bear's telltale "Oh, bother!" to clue me to the next plot twist, when Rabbit starts ranting, "That's not right! That's not how it's done! It's got to be done like THIS!" and he goes berserk, snatching things away from everyone and shrieking. Christopher Robin and the others try to interrupt Rabbit's hysterics, but the bunny is oblivious to anything but making sure things get done his way.

Holy cow, I think to myself. I've worked with that guy.

Now, I would hope there's no one in your



group that you identify with a crazed cartoon character. But I know from my experiences teaching college, conducting workshops, and working with writers that there can be that one person (and you and I know, it only takes one) who brings the whole group to a screeching halt. How do you cope with a member who has his own agenda and tries to monopolize every meeting?

Well, trust me that just praying he'll stay home sick, while comforting, may not be enough to help your group move forward. One person can paralyze the morale of an entire group. The beautiful thing is that no matter how psycho Rabbit gets, Winnie the Pooh never loses his focus. So here's the Pooh primer for working with the Rabbit in your group.

**1. Don't become a rabid Rabbit yourself.** Fall back on good home training. In education, they call this "modeling appropriate responses." That means you act right, no matter how annoying your Rabbit is. He's interrupting again? Wait patiently and then



ask, "May I speak?" He's getting increasingly loud and agitated? Stay calm, without the exaggerated tooth-clenching responses that say, "You're getting on my nerves." Being gracious is a skill that gets better and easier with practice.

### 2. No wallowing in a Rabbit hole of misery.

Insist on staying positive. Rabbits love to get everyone off on a bunny trail about how awful everything is. Statements like "Okay, let's work on some solutions" and "Now that we've identified the problem..." can remind your group to stay focused.

### 3. Burrow in with your Rabbit.

Have a private heart-to-heart and ask your Rabbit why he's part of the group if he's so obviously unhappy. Sometimes, people don't realize how negative and hostile they sound, and calling them on it can help them identify the areas they would like to work on, both in themselves and in the group.

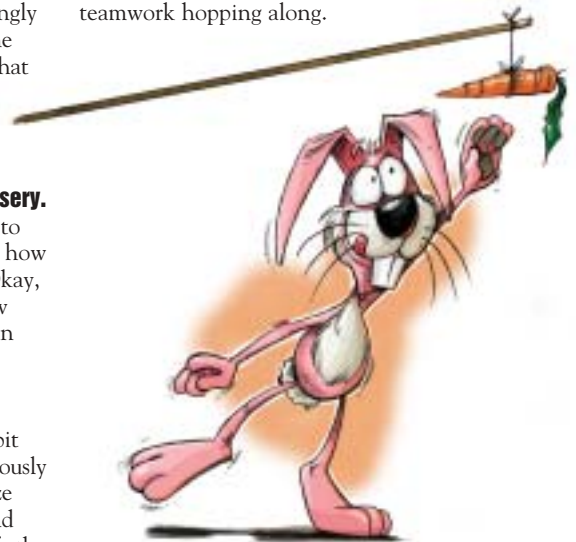
### The Tigger Effect

Thank heaven for the Tiggers in your group! People with bouncing enthusiasm can be the ultimate allies in working with the Rabbit in your group. Identify your members with Teflon egos and good attitudes—the ones who'll be able to deflect the criticism and the "my way" approach most Rabbits have. When it comes to setting up groups and teams for action, surrounding your Rabbit with positive thinkers can help maximize Rabbit's contributions as well. You may want to confide in a Tigger or two that your goal is to help Rabbit find the place in your group where he can best contribute. However, don't leave the burden of coping with your Rabbit to others—make sure your bouncy, fun-fun-fun-fun members aren't being exhausted by the demands of a difficult group member.

**4. Give Rabbit his own patch.** Talk with your problem person alone and find out what skills he thinks he brings to the group. Find tasks he can do solo and make him feel like you're counting on him to accomplish those tasks. However, avoid areas where he'll need a committee or partner unless you're sure you've got people that can cope with Rabbit effectively on their own. (See sidebar.)

**5. No Rabbit hunts.** If every time your Rabbit opens his mouth, you let other group members sigh, roll their eyes, or object, you're allowing the problem to gather momentum. Let members vent privately if he's driving them nuts, but have a zero-tolerance policy about public displays of bad manners. Relying on a system such as Robert's Rules of Order can help you keep the pace and minimize emotional outbursts.

**6. Dangle a carrot for Rabbit.** Having tangible rewards for achievement within a group can help move everybody forward. A reward to look forward to can create positive peer pressure and get a little teamwork hopping along.



**7. Recognize, then ricochet, Rabbit's ideas.** Publicly recognizing the portions of an idea that have merit and then mentioning the areas where it still needs to be fleshed out can help you take on an issue without wounding the Rabbit's pride. Giving an open-ended time frame like "when we complete current projects" can also help you avoid taking on a no-win Rabbit issue.

**8. Call on Christopher Robin—or your advisor, as the case may be.** Faculty and administrators have a long history of working with difficult students. Use their expertise as a resource and let them be the heavy if you're still struggling.

The good thing about most movies is that the good guys win in the end, and Winnie the Pooh is no exception. It can take a Pooh-like demeanor and some ordinary kindness, along with some careful strategizing, to achieve the happy ending your group needs. 🐻