

Side Conversations Video Transcript

- A very common problem in meetings is when the discussions break into two or three conversations. Really, the leader of the meeting should bring it back to order. But sometimes they don't, and so you have maybe a couple of people who keep muttering things between themselves at one end of the table, possibly for a good reason. And maybe they are talking about work. But still, it's a problem. **So ideally, you would all agree to ground rules before the start.** Not just that we're all going to talk as one group one person at a time and not let the meeting fragment, but also to agree that anyone has the authority to point it out if they think it's happening in order to get the meeting back on track. Anyone at the meeting can do this, not just the leader of the group. Then, once the meeting is under way and has started to fragment, you could have an agreed way to signal that it's happening and that it needs to be brought back together to the leader. This might be anything from just directly saying to the leader, "Sabrina, I think the meeting "is splitting up into submeetings," to in a more informal meeting all throwing stress balls at whoever is talking when they shouldn't be. If you all agreed at the start, then it's okay to do this. After all, we can all forget about the other people in the meeting at times. If nothing is agreed, you could still point out side conversations. A diplomatic way is to say, "Sabrina, there are several things going on "and I'm worried about missing some good stuff."Can we get it all brought back together, do you think?" We could also be even less assertive than that and just say to the people themselves, "Guys, I missed that and I think it might "have been really good. "What was it again?" So they have to repeat it to the whole meeting, and the leader is alerted to the fact that people aren't hearing everything. Of course, ideally, it would be the leader that keeps control of the meeting. And for them, there are several escalating options for doing this. They could initially ignore it for a short time in the hope that it will stop again. Next, the leader can ask if the people who are talking are okay. Is there a problem? Next, if they keep doing it, the leader could ask, "Can we have one meeting, please, "because we don't want everyone else "to miss what you're contributing?" And, perhaps, if a couple of people are always whispering together, it's worth considering controlling where they sit at the next meeting so they're separated. To sum up, as with most problems in meetings, it's really the job of the leader to keep control and sort out things like fragmentation. But given that the problems exist, it's clear that leaders of meetings sometimes don't do their job. So, if you're a participant, it might well be useful to either push the leader into doing their job or to just do the leader's job for them.

So the next time you're at a meeting and people are chatting, are you going to point it out to the leader? Or are you going to try dealing directly with the ones who are doing it? And what will be the exact words that you're going to use? Use the notetaking tool to answer these questions.