

Conflict Resolution

Dealing with Hostile Audiences

By Anthony J. Sadar, M.S.

Conflict resolution requires many special communication skills. One of the most challenging situations involves a public meeting where you must address a hostile audience. Such meetings can be unnerving experiences with disgruntled, anguished and confused residents seeking explanations, angry activists chanting slogans, special-interest representatives posing unanswerable questions and eager news reporters competing for the most inciting sound bites.

In order to help speakers cope and succeed in such challenging settings, the following general guidelines for effective public speaking are offered.

- Dress appropriately to match the style and temperament of the audience (when in doubt, err on the side of more-formal dress).
- Be well prepared and confident (without being arrogant) in your position to support your viewpoint.
- Have a proper attitude (including empathy and rapport) for a better chance of acceptance.
- Speak clearly and with compassion to increase understanding and acceptance.
- Explain assumptions and limitations to facilitate interpretation.
- Avoid confusing terms.
- Be honest, frank and open to build trust.
- Hold all questions until you deliver your message.
- Listen to concerns so that needs will be met.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, say so, but offer to find out and provide the answer.
- Above all, approach every audience with integrity.

Hopefully, with help from the guidance above, the company communicator can take charge of the meeting and provide acceptable, understandable answers that bring solace to those potentially impacted by facility operations.

However, to further increase opportunities for constructive dialog and decrease chances for confrontations during “high-energy” meetings, the speaker should do the following.

If you do not know the answer to a question, say so, but offer to find out and provide the answer.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

- At the outset of your presentation, ask for common courtesy while you deliver your message.
- If an individual rudely disrupts your speech, move away from the lectern and casually toward the hostile individual. This will demonstrate your personal concern for any legitimate issues the individual may have while at the same time show your lack of intimidation.
- If a sensitive concern arises that is too complex to handle in a public setting, offer to meet after the presentation to address the difficult issue privately.

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The second item above was once demonstrated effectively by the late Senator John Heinz (R-PA) (1938–1991). At the beginning of a large town-meeting type address, as Senator Heinz started his opening remarks, a male audience member, about 30 years old, rose and in a loud voice began nonsensically berating the senator about some issue. Senator Heinz moved away from the lectern and down the center aisle to the row where the irate constituent was standing. This immediately brought the man's volume down and he began speaking more reasonably. Therefore, the senator's actions were effective in producing a more cordial conversation.

Reviewing and practicing these steps should help those with challenging communication situations address hostile audiences with more confidence and good results.

About the Author:

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