

Defusing a Hostile Audience

Don't fight fire with fire.

Author Sandra DeLazier is a Toastmaster in California.

Fight fire with fire, and what do you end up with? Ashes. Not exactly great results, but that's the way we've been taught to deal with the fires of confrontation in our lives. And that's the way we as speakers instinctively respond to hostile audience members. Whether we're speaking to convention-goers in an auditorium, a group of co-workers, or an audience of one - perhaps a boss, spouse or child - we generally react to verbal aggression with equal or greater aggression. We fight fire with fire, and the result is usually verbal disaster.

Even experienced speakers fall into this trap. An example that comes to mind is that of a former United States ambassador to China and his reaction to demonstrators who attacked a speech he was making at a U.S.-China trade exposition. At first, the ambassador withstood the attack, but finally the beleaguered man shouted, "Go back to China all of you! You're a bunch of cowards!" The ambassador's reaction certainly did not help him.

We can avoid disasters like this with a little forethought and training in ways to cope with hostile audiences. Defusing confrontation is a learned skill that we are rarely taught. But we can - and should - master strategies that we can access under pressure and techniques that will help us to savor the feeling of saying the right thing at the right time.

I never thought much about defusing confrontation until I had to deal with hostile audiences on a somewhat regular basis (does this say something about my job?). After a number of confrontations, I finally (duh!) realized that my conditioned responses were not working. I decided to get smart, so I did some research and came up with five basic principles for redirecting an antagonist's energy and calming strident situations. These principles are simple, but powerful. They can be applied in almost any confrontational situation. Consider them for keeping your cool when your listeners turn up the heat:

- **Listen, paraphrase and empathize.** Everyone wants to be listened to. However, people who listen seem to be the exception rather than the rule. So the surprise factor alone is often enough to neutralize an irate person's energy. Show that you are listening by giving the irate person 100 percent of your attention - maintain eye contact, keep your expression neutral and your body language open. Most important, don't interrupt. Argumentative people often just need to get something off their chests. If you interrupt, you fuel the fire.

When the person finishes, paraphrase back to him what you heard. Nothing calms a person faster than hearing his own ideas repeated back. Once you have paraphrased, empathize, using phrases such as "I can understand your point." Or "I see where you're coming from." These phrases do not mean that you agree, but that you do understand the position. Your goal here is to calm your adversary's negative emotional state. Listen, understand and stroke the person's ego, and you'll be amazed at how fast the steam can go out of someone's argument.

- **Never react in anger.** Our natural instinct when we are in an explosive situation or feel that we are being attacked is to lash back and protect our own egos. However, when you lose your cool and allow yourself the short-lived satisfaction of venting your anger, your opponent immediately controls you. What began as your opponent's problem has now become yours. You must find ways to disassociate yourself from the irate person's problem and respond in a non-defensive manner. A simple phrase, such as "I can see that you are upset," is a true statement and goes a long way in changing the situation's dynamics. Keep the attention on the adversary and what's bothering her. By demonstrating self-control, you can springboard past the confrontation, thus depriving the other person of power. If there is an audience of many people, link yourself with the group. Say things like, "I can discuss this briefly, but I'm sure you'll understand the importance of sticking to the issues that affect all of us." If your adversary continues, she will appear out of control. Audience sympathy will be with you.

- **Never defend.** The most important rule to remember in dealing with any confrontation is to never, under any circumstances, react by defending. A defensive reaction is the most common, but it almost never works. Watch someone under fire get defensive, and you see someone who actually appears to be guilty. Little by little, that person will lose ground and get backed up against the wall. Again, the solution to the problem is to turn the tables on your adversary. Suppose someone says your solution to a problem is totally wrong. If you respond with "No, it's not, because...", you've already lost. Now you're defending, and your opponent has the opportunity to pick apart your reasoning. Next time you are in such a situation, try a response like "What do you see as being right?" or "What do you think needs to be done?" With questions like these, you turn the tables. The spotlight will be on your opponent, who must explain himself and justify his beliefs - rather than the other way around.

- **Redirect the focus.** This point has several levels. Of foremost importance is remembering that you need to control the situation. Suppose you're asked a "loaded" question (one filled with emotion or underlying accusations) like, "What is your company going to do about its reprehensible, blood-sucking personnel policies?" Obviously, this question is intended to put you on the spot and is not favorable to you or your company. However, you'd be surprised how many speakers fall into the trap of responding to the question as it is presented, making the mistake of emulating the speaker. Instead, try these ways to turn the situation to your advantage:

1. **Rephrase the question.** You might say something like, "You seem to be asking how our company is working to better our employees' quality of life. Let me lay out the steps that have recently been taken in the areas of"

2. **Ask questions back.** Many speakers feel they must answer immediately when asked a question. Not so. You may need to ask a question instead to clarify an obscure question from the audience member - or to expose a hidden agenda. For example, if you're asked, "How can any ethical person come up with policies such as you just described?" you are being set up for attack. Above all, don't respond to the underlying presupposition, which is that you are unethical. Instead ask your adversary questions, such as: "What are you wanting me to say?" or "Can you please explain what you mean?" Your questions will give you several advantages: They'll (1) get the agenda out in the open, (2) get your opponent to offer specifics that are easier to deal with, and (3) give you time to think.

3. Use the question to make a transition. Although you never want to give the impression that you are trying to evade a difficult question, there are times when you need to take a step off the path you were on. Develop your own repertoire of transition sentences that will help you move to more secure territory. Try variations of these: "The real issue you're discussing seems to be...." ; "What you're really saying is..."; or "What we should ask is.... " These phrases will take you over the problem area to a topic you can address. At the same time, saying them gives you time to gather your thoughts. These words will also give you the opportunity to look and sound good. You'll appear (and will be) articulate and in control, and your audience will respond favorably to this. But remember, credibility is one of your most important assets as a speaker. Don't lose it by appearing to dodge a question.

- **Develop exit strategies.** Ultimately, you need to think about ways of extricating yourself from situations in which an irate person just will not stop trying to dominate your time and attention. Situations like these are common. I find it surprising how often speakers allow one or two persons from the audience to subject them to sustained hostile questioning. Masochism is not a requirement for being an effective speaker! Usually applying the first four principles resolves conflict situations, but sometimes there are die-hards who just will not "let go". Try these strategies to release yourself from the grip of verbal terrorists:

- 1. Ally yourself with the audience.** People are profoundly influenced by the will of the group. Say something like, "Perhaps it would be better to take up your issues at a later time, since I am sure there are other members of the audience who would appreciate time to speak." At this point, there is usually a wave of verbal agreement from the audience. When you have the group's support, you will see that it is much more difficult for one individual to persist in ill-mannered behavior.

- 2. Ask for the questioner's name.** Once you ask your interrogator to identify herself in front of everyone, she's much more likely to back down. Simply say, "I'm sorry, but I didn't catch your name." Then wait. Take away that hostile person's anonymity, and it's much harder for her to continue holding you hostage.

- 3. Don't be afraid to end it.** If all else fails, close down your presentation. The bottom-line solution is to tell your audience that you don't want to waste their time with the disruption and then simply exit with grace.

You now have powerful knowledge that will help you deal with any sort of audience confrontation. You will find, as I did, that it is possible to deal calmly with fiery situations; you just need to practice. I hope that your hostile situations are few. However, you now know that, should you need to use them, there are ways to respond that will help you realize success rather than create a pile of ashes.