



Dealing With a Hostile Audience

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Deliver enough presentations and you'll inevitably face an audience that is at best indifferent, and at worst, hostile to your point of view. You'll sometimes face the task of delivering bad news or explaining an unpopular policy. When you're prepared for such an eventuality, you'll be less likely to lose your cool and more successful in getting your message across.

The first step when facing such an audience is to choose the overall strategy to best manage your position. Sometimes, an audience simply has false information that serves as the basis of their hostility. In this case, choose a *correcting* strategy. Your goal is to set the record straight without making people feel uniformed or inadequate. When extenuating circumstances require an unpopular policy, let the audience know that some things are beyond your control. Be careful when using this *conditional* strategy not to appear to be shirking responsibility. Often, good reasons exist for a policy or position that is disliked. Help your audience understand how it was developed and why it's in place. This is a *justification* strategy. You can enlist audience support by asking for alternatives and making a commitment to consider them. Finally, you or your organization will sometimes be in the wrong and an *apology* is called for. When you make an apology, make certain your regret and sincerity are evident. Explain what you'll do to keep the same things from happening in the future.

Whichever strategy you choose, there are certain steps you can take that will help you maintain control and keep the atmosphere civil.

1. Separate the person from the issue.

Make certain you are seen as a human being and not an extension of the contentious issue. Show the audience you have similar concerns.

2. Ask them not to kill the messenger.

Tell them why delivering the unpleasant news is your job, not your enjoyment. Let them know you realize you have an unpleasant task, but they deserve to be kept "in the loop."

3. Don't argue with a heckler.

A friend of mine was president of a private club. During the annual meetings, there was always a heckler or two. His strategy was to be polite. Eventually, the audience will take care of the heckler. It worked for him every time.

4. Remain calm.

People take their lead about how to react to a situation based on the person in the front of the room. If you are visibly angry, upset or defensive, they'll take that as the appropriate mindset and behavior as well.

5. Recognize concerns rather than trivializing them.

Nothing will make an audience turn against you faster than when they believe you are trivializing or making light of something important to them.

6. Use objective evidence rather than personal opinion.

Instead of saying "I feel" or "I believe" say "Research shows us" or "The facts are these." Position yourself as the conduit for bad news rather than the source of it.

7. Remove anonymity. When an audience member asks a hostile question, ask him to identify himself, the organization he represents and to repeat the question. Without the protection of anonymity, people will be much more civil and moderate in their approach.

8. Ask if there is something you or your organization has done to upset a person. appreciate your willingness to listen. You're giving the person an opportunity to make a case. If a person is being unreasonable or over-emotional others will quickly see it. If not, the rest of the audience will appreciate your openness.

9. Be certain to show the benefits of attending the presentation.

Some of the most hostile audiences are people who attend compulsory training or briefings. They feel like hostages. The best way to win them over is to show them what they have to gain by being there.

10. Defuse the emotional wording.

Complex issues are often distilled into simplistic terms. For example, when you're asked "Have you stopped polluting the environment yet," rephrase to "the question was about our environmental policy."

Initially hostile audiences don't have to equate to unsuccessful presentations. Choose the appropriate strategy, manage the atmosphere and maintain your composure. When you do, you can often salvage the situation.



Joe Sommerville shows professional services firms how to increase visibility, enhance credibility and close more business. Download the first chapter of RainMaking Presentations: How to Grow Your Business by Leveraging Your Expertise at www.RainMakingPresentations.com.