

Handling an Antagonistic Audience

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Even if you have overcome anxiety over speaking in front of an audience, you may still be anxious about the possibility of facing a hostile or confrontational audience member. It seems scary, but is truly not difficult to handle. A few simple tips will allow you to prepare for, or even prevent, this uncomfortable situation. Through developing a strategy and a few tactics for handling these uncomfortable encounters, you will build your overall presentation confidence. However, it's important to remember that the odds of this happening to you are quite low.

First: Mentally prepare. Know that hostile audiences and antagonistic audience members are rare, unless you're a stand-up comedian or a politician. Trust yourself to handle whatever happens. Determine that you will maintain your composure no matter what. Resolve to remain the leader, even if your leadership is challenged. Most important for you is to NOT take anything said personally. You must remain focused on the issues. This truly is a communication game you are destined to win. You will want to demonstrate an attitude of sincerity and confidence, plus a willingness to listen, even when you disagree with the position of the questioner.

Next: Develop your strategy. You should prepare several to choose from, depending on the situation that unfolds. Anticipate possible opposition and plan to deal with it early in your presentation. Try to predict questions likely to be asked and prepare your answers. It is wise to allow an aggressive individual a short time to vent, but as the leader, you should not subject the rest of the group to a long, drawn out complaint or problem.

When you respond, do not direct your remarks to the entire audience. You don't want them to feel that you think they support the comments. You also don't want it to appear to your *adversary* that the rest of the audience supports him. However, you will want to turn your attention to them, once you're ready to move on. If you remain fixed on the one hostile person, you will encourage him to continue interacting with you.

Finally: Equip yourself with a supply of **Positive Power™ Lines** you can deliver at a moment's notice. **I DO NOT** recommend that you say anything like: *Though you seem reluctant to admit your ignorance, you're obviously quite willing to demonstrate it* at any point in the encounter--no matter how much you feel like it!

Instead say something like the following:

That's a good question. (This works well whenever you need a moment to re-group.)

Thank you for bringing up that issue. I appreciate the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings or *I appreciate your willingness to bring up this matter.* (Either works well when the level of hostility is low.)

If the individual is especially forceful, try saying: *It took a lot of courage for you to say that in front of the entire group. Does anyone else have the same question?* If no one else or, only a few people indicate they do, say: *Then what I'd like to do is to continue. I will be happy to talk with you (and the others who share your concern) privately following the program. Thank you again.* Then turn to the rest of the audience--don't continue looking at the questioner.

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If you have been interrupted, you might ask the individual to hold his remarks until the end of your presentation. If a large number express the fact that they share the concern, calmly and confidently deliver the information you have at the moment and, if necessary, offer to get additional information to them after you look further into the matter. It's even okay to say that you don't have any answers for them at this time, that this was outside the scope of the talk you had planned. Promise to get back to them promptly with your answers. People respect authenticity and a willingness to do research on their behalf.

Throughout your presentation, remain positive. Former President Bill Clinton dealt often and well with opposition from his audiences (proof that practice develops skills). Turn your body and your gaze from the combative individual to the rest of the audience and, adapting one of Clinton's lines say, *He is venting his frustration because he wants to see change. That's a step in the right direction.* Then you can move on to address issues related to the question or comment, just as you planned. Expect and plan for the unexpected and you're less likely to end up **speechless**.

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