



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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How to Handle the Audience Bully

by James Gray

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The inconsiderate and rude abound these days. They exhibit a host of infuriating behaviors—among them yakking loudly and obviously on cell phones in public places, blocking traffic after blithely driving into congested intersections at the turn of a light and, incomprehensively, walking into you (smacking into you) on city sidewalks. Is the long-established pedestrian directive of bearing to one's right so hard to follow?

Sadly, the number of obnoxious among us appears to be increasing exponentially.

It's a statistical certainty that if you conduct enough meetings and deliver enough presentations, you'll eventually encounter members of this disagreeable crew. They're easily identified under two main personality types: the know-it-all and the disrupter.

The good news is that both groups can be managed. The key to dealing effectively with the difficult is to take them on early and decisively. If you don't, they'll weaken your credibility while traumatizing your audience.

So, let's examine how to handle those who seek to undermine our communication, according to their disorder.

The know-it-all

He (and in 95 percent of cases, it's a he) knows everything. And he's obsessed about persuading everyone else he knows everything.

If you're running a workshop he'll interrupt you early and often. He'll look for contradictions and inconsistencies, and insist on providing the group with his insights, relevant or not.

A know-it-all identifies himself even before a meeting begins. He'll strut in with a swagger and a slight roll of the eyes, and invariably position himself as far away from other participants as possible. (Why would he sit with them when he's so much smarter?)

Then the challenges begin.

You need to deal with difficult personality types through escalating stages of response. For the know-it-all, the first stage is engagement. Ask him his first name. Use it frequently in conversation; his ears will prick up at the sound.

Ask him questions: "Bob, what's your experience been in that area?" Your intention is to make the know-it-all an ally, a co-presenter, your new best friend.

Certainly, you'll pay a price at the outset, because Bob will undoubtedly take up a lot of the proceedings. But far better to have him contribute positively. After he's had his status as the brightest entity in the free world confirmed, you can back him off and begin paying more attention to the other participants. In rare cases, Bob won't respond to your outreach. He'll continue to confront you, immobilizing your session and alarming other participants.

Now, it's time to get tough. Stage 2 has to do with reminding the know-it-all (and, therefore, the group) of your expertise, while noting the limitations of his. "On the contrary, Bob," you might begin. "Most experts agree that this technique works best. Let me explain why."

If Bob still doesn't play ball, it's time to deploy the heavy artillery. Freeze him out. Limit eye contact with him. Answer his questions quickly and succinctly, continually reminding the group (and, therefore, Bob) that you have a busy agenda to get through.



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INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

In the vast majority of cases, the know-it-all will begin to exhibit the type of responsible conduct that facilitates re-entry. But remember: Never gloat. And when facing defiance, never panic. Always keep your communications cool.

The disrupter

He (although, in my experience women offend in this area as often as men) likes to talk, which can be a problem, because he often insists on doing so when presenters are speaking. Again, the staged response needs to be implemented.

If two people in your audience are chatting, identify the initiator of the conversation. Keep talking as you look directly at him. Most will get the message and stop further discussion.

But some won't. If you encounter a particularly insensitive observer who doesn't pick up on your initial approach, proceed quickly to stage 2. Stop speaking. Square your shoulders to the perpetrator and look at him impassively. Keep looking at him, without speaking, until he stops talking.

He'll usually return your gaze, sheepishly, and mutter: "Sorry." That should do it. You'll have quelled the impoliteness. However, if the disrupter continues to talk, nail him. Stop talking. Look directly at him. Then, raising your voice slightly and betraying just the slightest hint of irritation, say: "May I have your complete attention, please? Thank you."

In 99.95 percent of cases, that will do it. If, though, for whatever irrational reason the intransigent resumes talking, it's no longer just your issue. Make it a collective issue. Firmly announce to the crowd: "We have a problem here. This person continues to disrupt our meeting. How do you suggest we handle it?" Audience members will invariably tell the disrupter to be quiet, or leave. Perhaps someone will call security. Whatever the decision, you'll have empowered others affected by the agitator's behavior to resolve the situation. That way, it's not just you against him. It's the group against him.

There's a different kind of disrupter, represented by those angry and distraught citizens who vent their collective rage in public infor-

mation meetings organized to brief them on some government policy or decision, perhaps having to do with a local development or environmental concern.

Of course, in our democracy, we have the right to publicly express our opinion; it doesn't extend to tromping on the right of others to express theirs.

Canadian public officials at every level have set a bad precedent in public meetings ostensibly set up for the respectful exchange of information and views. They often sit at the front of an auditorium only to be interrupted, insulted and threatened by hundreds of enraged listeners. Nothing good or productive ever comes out of these encounters.

The officials have rights, too. They have the right not to be verbally abused or intimidated. However, they often make it tougher on themselves by failing to set the ground rules for audience conduct—they need to state up front that profanity, insults and shouting won't be tolerated. Swear once, and you're warned. Swear twice and you're asked to leave. Refuse to leave and the meeting will be terminated immediately. (Everyone pretty much understands the drill after that.)

In many ways, the difficult among us are like the schoolyard bullies of our youth. Avoiding them may work, for a time. But, ultimately, we need to confront them.

In communication, as in life, the sooner you do it, the better. □

