

Techniques for Handling Hostility

It's hard to fight our natures and stay calm and rational when someone is insulting or baiting or attacking us in public. Yet, in order to turn such an exchange around to our advantage and come out a clear winner, that process—remaining calm and rational—is the main exercise.

The big goals in confronting hostility and resolving it are, first, to find ways to hear *what* the hostility is about, and second, to add new light, new information, or an alternative point of view to show how *both* sides can resolve the disagreement.

But perhaps the biggest goal is to save face in front of your audience; to show them that you can stay in control of your feelings *and* your facts, and to continue to convince them, even if you're verbally assaulted.

Take a Breath

When tempers flare or icy comments slice through the air, our typical next step is to put up our dukes and fight back. This is not useful and surely not recommended as your best response in public. And—you actually *have* the time and room to decide on a course of action . . .

Your opponent is already hostile; you're not. So you're at a much lower level of emotion than he/she is. Therefore the first step in handling hostility is to buy some time so you can calm down and think. I suggest you literally "take a breath." Not one of those giant heaving sighs, visible in the back row, but a slow internal breath that gives you a sense of slowing down, not speeding up, the blood pressure.

Identify the Hostility

Suppose your pants dropped around your ankles while delivering a speech. What would you do? Try shuffling off the stage with a smile, pretending they're not down around your ankles? Or would you bend down, pick them up, and comment on how the audience is "getting to know more about you than just your subject matter"?

Choice 1 means you think they're sightless, totally without feelings, or quite accustomed to people losing their pants. Choice 2 says, "You and I both know what happened and how it feels. Instead of trying to hide, what can I do now to put us both at ease?"

The biggest mistake people make when trying to handle a hostile questioner is to pretend it's not happening. This makes the audience *more* uncomfortable! They can see what just happened. We're all quick