

Westside Toastmasters is located in Los Angeles and Santa Monka, California

Handling the Hostile Crowd



Don't pout when they shout. Take these tips and work it out!

You're perfectly primed to do your talk. In fact, you're really cookin'. The opening comes off without a hitch - you've connected with the audience and they with you. But wait - someone barks a comment from the back row, "Hey! How can you say that? What are your qualifications?"

"Wh-what?" you reply, now noticeably nervous.

"How do we know you're knowledgeable enough to talk about this?"

Limping over your credentials, you pray that this satisfies that pain-in-the-neck. It seems to settle him somewhat. But way across the room you hear, "The second point you made is wrong..."

You're beginning to wish you had never set the alarm clock.

No matter how polished and professional your skills are, you can't control how your audience acts. Many speakers have encountered problematic individuals: participants disrupting by talking among themselves, someone who disagrees rudely, a non-responsive group, those who interrupt you continuously, those who challenge your qualifications to give the talk, and other awkward situations.

For instance when Diane Knaus, of the Annapolis Maryland Toastmasters club, gave a presentation for a remodeling project for her church, a man got up to say he thought she was wrong to consider renovation.

"I let him have his say, but members were becoming upset over his rudeness," she said. "I took a deep breath, cleared my throat and explained that the congregation had already decided they wanted to learn more about the plans. I then asked if he would like to speak about this after the meeting. He didn't."

At the following project meeting where the congregation was slated to vote, this man showed up and asked to address the group. He apologized to Knaus for his previous behavior and announced that he was willing to offer his help to the group. The way Knaus handled the situation enabled this fellow to examine what he was doing and maintain his dignity so he could humbly return to the group.

Who Are These "Difficult" People?

They are you and me under pressure - feeling uncomfortable, intimidated, powerless, lost or overlooked. The "difficult" people may seem quite different from us, but are they really? Perhaps they are simply exaggerated forms of our own imperfections.

The most important component of your talk is to educate and/or entertain an audience, whether that is a group of three or 300. Kirstin Carey, president of Orange Tree Training & Speaking Group, Inc. near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, warns her clients not to allow one audience member to spoil it for the rest of the crowd. Usually, she says, the audience recognizes the "heckler" for who he is.

Most mental health experts agree that disorderly behavior is a symptom of an unmet need. The more you understand the motivation behind the behavior, the more you understand that individual's need, which enables you to control damage to the rest of the group. This doesn't mean your role is to satisfy these needs, but recognizing the scenario can help you keep from taking the feedback personally, giving you the freedom to choose a more effective response.

Typical forms of the "thorny set" include the following. To help you recall the different types use the acronym: H-O-S-T-1-L-E

- **The Heckler** - Insulting, rude, persistent, this person is driven by the unmet need for a sense of personal worth.
- **The Over-zealous** - Often the first to raise or answer a question, this "eager beaver" makes it difficult for others to participate. This is an expression of a strong need for approval.
- **The Squawker** - An all-encompassing negativity is expressed in whining and complaining. This individual craves acknowledgement.
- **The Turned-off** - The audience member who is snoring, daydreaming, or writing out bills is experiencing an unmet need for connection.
- **The Intimidator** - Attempting to monopolize the situation by using aggressive words or actions, this person is operating under a desire for power.
- **The Lost** - Having little awareness of the benefits of your information, this person has a need for information or direction.
- **The Expert** - This "know-it-all" challenges the speaker and argues with other participants using limited knowledge on the topic. A yearning for recognition propels this behavior.

How to Contend with the Hostile Group

You have two choices in dealing with disruption and resistance. You can prepare in advance and mold your expectations to the reality of your situation. And you can take action on the spot, during your speech.

How to prepare yourself in advance:

- Know your audience. "One of the most important things that Toastmasters teaches you," says Knaus, "is that you need to know who is in the audience and who may be for or against your position."
- Validate your data. "Take the time to check facts," Knaus says. "You owe your audience integrity." Double-checking information also serves to solidify your confidence and enables you to more easily cope with the bullies who confront you on accuracy.
- Design your talk around the time of day. "If the talk is in the morning when participants are apt to be

more rested, I tend to give more detailed information," says Jennifer Mayo, a technical trainer and public speaker. "But when I speak right after the lunch hour or later in the day when listeners are likely to be tired, I break up the talk with stretch and snack breaks whenever possible and use two or more formats for visuals, like writing on the white board and using a flip-chart." Upbeat background music, lower room temperature and using more light also helps keep the potentially drowsy awake - and add interest.

- Keep your purpose in mind at all times. If you are giving tips to victims on how to deal with stalkers, don't forget all the people you can help. If you are presenting statistics on global warming, remember the urgent need for action. Staying focused on your gut-level motive supersedes any annoyance and helps you to stay the course.
- "Seek first to understand, then be understood" is one habit of Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. Concentrate on the needs of the audience rather than on how you are doing and you'll leave the crowd better off than when they came in. Study people - observe their behavior and listen to their concerns - to better comprehend their wants and needs so that you can offer a more appropriate presentation.
- Give others the right to be wrong. This is tough. When you stop demanding that others adhere to your point of view, you can relax, take a step back and allow confrontation without feeling threatened. So what if someone else sees the proposition differently? You don't have to change people who choose to act disrespectfully. What you must do, however, is prevent them from interfering with the rights of the rest of the group.

How to manage the situation on site:

- Set Out: One of the best gifts you can grant your audience is to lay out parameters ahead of time. "Most problems can be staved off by how you start out," Mayo says. "If you address issues up front, your listeners will know what to expect. If you respect the audience members, they will respect you." That way she claims, members won't have to use interruptions and power plays in the attempts to get their needs met.

"Much of the talking that occurs between listeners involves things that can be settled before the speech begins," Mayo claims. This might include participants asking each other if they are hot or cold, when a break can be expected, or deciding where they'll eat lunch.

As an example, this is how she starts her speaking engagements: We're all important here. I understand you all have things going on outside of here. Please turn all cell phones off or put on silent mode. If you need to take a call, please go out to the hallway so as not to disrupt the rest of the group. You can expect a five- to seven-minute break on the hour. There are food and drink machines down the hall and smoking is permitted in the lounge downstairs. If you get hot or cold, let me know so I can adjust the temperature.

Make sure the group understands that you are establishing these rules so that they don't have to be disturbed or interrupted during your speech. Without directly saying so, make it clear that these

guidelines are not for you, but to make their time with you comfortable and valuable.

- **Step Aside:** Whenever a personal attack is being launched on you, imagine it's a gust of wind and all you have to do is take a step to your left or right for it to blow right past you. Symbolic action is powerful, so be sure to physically take that side step. It gives you a sense of control over the situation.

Concede a few points. Pick your battles carefully; not all of them need to be won. Jamal, a member of the Express Toastmasters Club in Karachi, Pakistan, says, "One must be humble enough to clearly admit to questions that don't have answers rather than giving wrong information." In fact, when you want to take the wind out of a dissenter's sails, agree with the criticism. Rather than responding to the attack, simply thank that person for sharing their opinion or say something like, "that's an interesting point," then continue with the presentation. If a heckler repeats an objectionable behavior or nastily demands a more comprehensive response from you, invite that person to talk with you at the end of your presentation.

Another way to step away from unnecessary conflict is to give the group a break. Mayo used this technique while teaching an adult education class. "I had mentioned a number of places to buy a computer when one of the students sarcastically started in on me about my recommendations and detailed what he would suggest instead. Mayo allowed him to make his point, which was a good one, and explained that she made her recommendations based on the needs of the class and the students' lack of computer experience."

Nevertheless he continued to raise the issue throughout the lecture. "I could feel the tension in the room so I gave them a break," Mayo says. A couple of the guys walked out with him and I assume talked to him about his behavior because his tone was much less caustic throughout the rest of the class. Sometimes the peer pressure of the group is your greatest ally. You just have to trust the audience to use it."

- **Step Up:** Of course there are times when you have to take a more direct tack. But be careful: embarrassing an audience member can make the whole group uncomfortable.

"It's quite easy to lose the audience's attention," says Arsalaan Haleem, also a member of the Toastmasters Club in Karachi. "One thing I have learned is you have to maintain eye contact. If you do, there is less chance of them getting distracted. It gives you a more attentive audience."

Stepping closer to a participant who is drowsy or disruptive works similar to eye contact; they both make it difficult for the disrupter to remain hidden. It helps to raise your voice at this point as well. Asking that person a direct question is another way to bring him or her into the limelight. Once "discovered," most people will comply with the needs of the group.

But remember, whether someone is whispering on the side of the room, nodding off in the front or constantly raising a hand from the back row, you can still pull off a super speech. Keep a few of these tips in mind and you'll soon be looking forward to an opportunity to try them out and successfully overcome the next hostile crowd.

By Judi_Balley

[View articles on similar topics](#)

Westside Toastmasters on Meetup