

CONFLICT

# How to Speak to an Unruly Crowd

by John Baldoni

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*The speaker was doing his determined best to continue speaking but the audience had other ideas. Those in attendance were restless and eager to get to a reception for free drinks and snacks. Still, the speaker plowed on through his presentation, seeking to talk over the catcalls and murmuring.*

This scene came back to me when watching news coverage of protesters disrupting town hall meetings on health care reform that congresspeople are holding in their districts. Most members of congress are not as naïve as the speaker I described; they know enough not to ignore hostile crowds. Some seek to engage the protesters; others pack it in and call it a day.

There is no best way to handle an unruly crowd but clearly the executive just described did the wrong thing; he ignored the audience. More adept speakers, like politicians, will seek to engage the audience. If that is your choice and it is safe for you to speak, then here are some suggestions when dealing with a tough and vocal audience.

**Be prepared.** Every speaker must learn what her audience expects before she arrives to speak. In the case of the executive, he did not consider the fact that he was the final speaker of the day and the only thing standing between the audience and a reception. On a more serious note, if you expect people to be hostile to your message, study up on the reasons why they may be upset. You want to integrate your counter arguments into your presentation, or be prepared to deliver those arguments if questions arise.

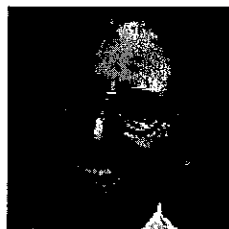
**Be flexible.** If someone heckles, acknowledge it. Comedians, who often earn their stripes by performing in small nightclubs, learn early in their careers how to have fun with hecklers. Sometimes you can parry the jibes and have a quick back-and-forth dialogue. This demonstrates that the speaker is in control, not the heckler. But cut off the debate quickly and move forward with your presentation. You cannot cede control to the crowd.

**Be resolute.** If the shouters will not be silenced, then give the rest of the audience an opportunity to voice their opinions. Negotiate time to continue but promise to take questions from the audience as soon as you finish your remarks. If this occurs, abandon the script and speak directly to the audience. Be brief. And keep your cool. Shouting back makes you one of the mob; speaking with confidence acknowledges your authority over the message.

There is no guarantee that any of these suggestions will quiet a crowd. As we have seen with the health care protests, some attendees are not coming to listen — they are coming to disrupt. As with unruly and spoiled children, there is little reasoning that can be done.

**When a disruptive mood prevails, or if you feel unsafe, walk away.** Do so calmly and purposefully. Stride confidently off the stage to a quiet and protected space. *(Of course if people are throwing things at you, exit hastily.)*

It takes a strong sense of self to face a restless crowd. The operative principle when engaging an audience is control. If you have it, continue; if you lose it, retreat.



John Baldoni is an internationally recognized executive coach and leadership educator. His most recent book is *MOXIE: The Secret to Bold and Gutsy Leadership*.