



The Speech Clinic®



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How do you handle difficult listeners?

Always assume that the audience is friendly. But occasionally there are individuals who can cause you discomfort. You can often read their attitude from their body language. As long as they are quiet there is no problem but comments often come without fail. It is important that you do not panic but handle this professionally. And that is not so difficult. Here are a few general tips:

1. **Depersonalize.** Don't take it personally. People have their own personal emotional baggage. If, for example, you speak about a deadly intestinal disease, X may leave the room due to a feeling of sickness and Y because a family member just died in that disease and avoids crying in public.
2. **Detach.** Don't start to argue or enter into a discussion. That only worsens the situation. Don't let your emotions get out of control. Ask questions to gain understanding. Don't get defensive.
3. **Defuse.** One of the best ways to defuse is using humour. Take a light, playful approach. If you get tense, the negative energy will increase.

A negative or disruptive behaviour of a listener is a symptom of an unmet need. If you as a speaker can meet that need, you defuse all negativism. Here follow a few characters and some tips on how to handle them:

The whiner – the type who always has a “yes, but” in reply to your solutions. Finds fault with everything but has no own solutions. The whiner feels helpless and wants to be cared for. Don't start to argue or enter into a discussion. Rather ask others in the audience for alternatives which may meet the needs of the whiner. If this does not work, then just ignore.

The expert – often in fact is an expert. The expert is in need for recognition. Give it to him/her and create an ally in stead of an opponent. Recognise this person as an expert and ask others in the audience for comments to start a short discussion in order to divert focus from you. You never need to be ashamed if someone in the audience happens to know more than you. They have never heard your version and that's why they have come.

The rambler – a person who goes on and on without coming to the point. This is the type of person whom you may ask for a destination and who would reply with a comprehensive description of the worsening traffic chaos. Just kindly refer to lack of time and promise to take it up at the end of the presentation if there is time. If not do it afterwards.

The dominator - monopolizes the conversation, an audience monster who has to be tamed. Recognize him/her and ask him/her to come up stage to explain further. If (s)he refuses but continues to dominate, then just ignore and engage others. If that doesn't help, announce a break and talk to him/her.

One more thing. You have no obligation to let everybody who raises an arm speak. YOU are in control and YOU decide what suits YOU best. Keep that control!

As mentioned above, remember to **Depersonalize, Detach and Defuse!**

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