



Handling Difficult People in Your Audience

Source: *The Great Trainer's Guide* by Sue Vineyard

Most interpretive programs run very smoothly. Unfortunately when you least expect it, an audience member (intentionally or unintentionally) can take control of your presentation. Here are some strategies to working with difficult audience members:

PROBLEM

STRATEGY

Griper

This person may have a legitimate complaint or is a person who just likes to complain. No matter, their behavior is focusing the groups attention away from the program theme. The best strategy is to point out the limited time you have to cover the material. Suggest this person speak with the appropriate person (teacher, volunteer coordinator or yourself) AFTER the program about concern/complaint.

Rambler

This person often begins addressing the topic at hand, but then proceeds to give farfetched analogies, or laundry lists and stories. The best strategy is to wait for that person to take a breath, and then thank him/her. Then, refocus the group's attention by restating the relevant points, and move on.

Wrong Subject

This person is not a rambler, just off the subject. It is best to take the blame yourself ("I'm sorry, something I said must have led you off course") rather than embarrassing the individual. Then restate the theme for the whole group, and move on.

Eager Speaker

This person may be a showoff, or well informed, or naturally wordy. It is important not to embarrass the person, but it is equally important that you remain the program leader. You can interrupt and ask, "That's an interesting point...now let's see what the group thinks of it." Or call on other individuals (by name) to illustrate everyone should participate in the discussion.

Highly Argumentative

This person may normally be a good-natured person but is upset about something unrelated to your program. Or this person may be a "professional heckler". No matter, keep your temper firmly in check! Do not let the group get excited either—stay on course. Honestly try to find merit in one of his/her points and express agreement, and then move on to something else. If the person makes an obvious misstatement, then toss it to the group and let them offer other possible explanations.

Side Conversations

Often, side conversations have nothing to do with your program theme. But they can distract you and other audience members. First, make sure the side conversation isn't about your topic—maybe they are trying to interpret what you said or cite a personal example. You may want to ask the group, "Does this make sense?" or "Does everyone understand what I've just covered?" If non-related conversations are interrupting the group, often you can stop them by standing up or moving next to the people talking. Usually they stop immediately because the speaker (and attention) is so close to them.

- Non-Involved This person may seem non-involved for several reasons -- they may be shy or timid; they may feel superior and the material is "below" them; they may have been "dragged" to the program by a spouse or parent; or they may be indifferent to the material being presented. Your actions will depend on what is motivating that person. Sometimes you can arouse interest by asking questions or opinions. You can draw that person "in" by involving the people around that individual. If/when that person does participate, compliment them (be sincere) on the comment or activity.
- Bored Often someone who looks bored, is bored. To arouse their interest, try asking that person for his/her opinion. As you get an idea about that person's knowledge and experience, you can refer back to him/her when talking to the entire group.
- The Heckler This person loves a good argument! They often think of themselves as the "devil's advocate" for the program, trying to enlighten the group to the big picture. If the argument gets personal, cut it off immediately. Remember, debate often can add to the discussion and presentation theme. Keep control of the group, and keep your cool. If you can refer that person to an agency (ie. Boulder County Parks and Open Space) or a specific person (ie. the wildlife specialist), that often can silence the heckler.

One last note:

Remember, you are there to inspire your audience to be good stewards of Parks & Open Space. A presentation is not the place for a debate or political discussion, and as representatives of Boulder County, we are not allowed to publicly express a political opinion at public or requested programs. Your passion for your topic is the best inspiration they need!

PROBLEM Non-Involved



Bored

The Heckler

STRATEGY