

Navigating the Shark Invested Waters of Conflict

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Other people can be your personal hell according to the author and playwright, Jean Paul Sartre. Those of us that make client presentations or host meetings know just how true that is. As speakers, difficult people are a nightmare. They need to be controlled, but yet the challenge is how to do it without destroying the relationship. While there is always the temptation to put annoying people “in their place,” fighting fire with fire leaves only ashes according to Anne Landers.

There are three key things that will help to navigate the shark invested waters of troubling situations. They are:

1. Be prepared mentally and emotionally.
2. Listen between the lines and respond intentionally.
3. Follow-up as necessary.

1. Be prepared mentally and emotionally.

Speakers should not be caught blind-sighted. They should do their homework and take the time to understand their audience, particularly the attitude listeners might have of them, their topic, or their organization. They should also understand exactly where there might be objections or questions and be prepared with how they will handle these difficult issues. In fact, it is a good idea to brainstorm all possible questions or issues and practice responding out loud.

In addition to preparing mentally, speakers should prepare emotionally. This means that before any meeting or presentation, they need to place themselves in the right zone or mental frame of mind for understanding so that they can respond effectively and not react on an emotional level. To do this,

speakers need to make a commitment with themselves to be fully aware of the levels of need of individuals in their audience—whether those needs are business, social or personal. Then, they must commit to speak from that place and to that place. This is no easy task. It requires tremendous discipline.

2. Listen “between the lines and respond intentionally.

Peter Drucker, the author, says the most important thing in any communication is to hear what isn’t being said. Thus, speakers must listen “between the lines.” Then, they must test the waters with what they think is the real issue. They should also ask questions and empathize. They should assume nothing. They cannot judge or label the person. They must not assume their solution or idea is the best. They discipline themselves to focus only on what the individual must want and need to behave in this manner, not on them selves and how they feel. They recognize that their words can be “windows or walls.” When they respond, they do so as if to their grandmother- respectfully, patiently.

If speakers have the right internal focus, they will be able to choose from a variety of options before responding. They will not “shoot from the hip.” This will give them an advantage or an edge. It will allow them to stay in control of the hostile or annoying person and give a response that will be intentional and not reactive. Because they have their internal compass pointed in the right direction, committed speakers do not argue, defend, “put down” or “gloss over.” They do not download data. Instead, they respond appropriately, bearing in mind the needs of the individual.

3. Follow-up

In a perfect world, speakers can resolve all troubling situations. The reality is that sometimes people are not as effective as they would like. Sometimes speakers have to “take things off line” for the good of the group. Amazingly, later follow-up with a difficult person often works wonders because it allows for a cooling down of emotions. It also offers greater exploration of issues since time is no longer an issue. Often a sense of mutual agreement results, and, even if it doesn’t, the follow-up attempt clearly demonstrates to the other person you respect his opinions and are concerned enough

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about his feelings to want to continue to articulate.

Handling difficult people in a meeting situation is challenging. Being successful should not be a crapshoot. With proper mental and emotional preparation, and by listening and responding with finesse, these difficult situations can be minimized.

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