

how to





defuse

a hostile audience

BY MICHAEL S. WOLFE, SR/WA

Right of way professionals have had or will have to confront a hostile audience or a heckler during their career. This usually occurs with a large group such as a public hearing or a homeowner's association meeting. It could also happen with a smaller group like a corporate board of directors or a meeting of company partners.

How you handle the hostile attitude of a group or hecklers in the audience is extremely important to the success or failure of a project, or the cost of acquiring property rights for the project. Will the majority or all of the property acquisitions be business-like and friendly? Or will the members of the audience leave with a hostile "I'll show you" attitude, resulting in costly attorney and court fees for your company from an action in eminent domain?

Your displayed attitudes and actions can persuade the group to favor or become more hostile toward you and your organization. Actions and attitudes of a few members of a group can become contagious to all members of the group.

General research shows that communication is 7 percent words, 38 percent tone of voice, and 55 percent gestures and body language. Defusing hostile members of an audience is a skill. This article provides proven techniques successfully used by experienced presenters, winning politicians and successful right of way professionals to gain the approval and acceptance of any audience during their presentation. Keep in mind that you cannot always persuade an audience. An audience will be persuaded by each individual's positive or negative "self-talk." It is vitally important that you are viewed in a positive manner.

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ACKNOWLEDGE ANY NEGATIVE FEELINGS IN YOUR OPENING STATEMENT

If hostile feelings are floating in the audience, acknowledge these feelings in the introduction of your presentation. You could open with, "I understand that many of you are upset with this proposed project because of the possible effect the project may have on the value of your home or the impact it may have on your business." Whether the concern involves a decrease in property value, an environmental issue, dust, noise or an increase in motor vehicle congestion, all of the concerns in the audience must be acknowledged. If a concern is not acknowledged, individuals holding that concern will feel slighted and feel that their concern is not important to you or your agency. Ignoring a concern will have the opposite effect of defusing a hostile person.

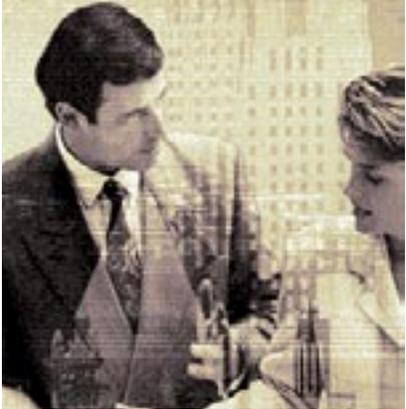
PROMISE TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

Once you have acknowledged the negative concerns of a project, assure the attendees that a question-and-answer session will follow your presentation. Let them know you will do your best to answer all questions during this session. If you are unable to answer a question, advise the attendees that you will either research the answer and get back to them, or have the appropriate person within the agency contact them. Also, let them know you will remain after the meeting to answer any questions they desire to ask in private (some people are deathly afraid to speak in public) and they are welcome to reach you by phone.

Acknowledging concerns in the beginning and promising to answer questions at the end of your presentation should have, with the proper tone of voice and display of open, friendly body language, defused much of the hostility. It's not about making anyone happy. It's not about changing anyone's mind about the project or the organization you represent. It's about defusing hostility – releasing the tension – so that members of the audience will not silently rehearse how they are going to attack you and your organization. At this point, you are attempting to develop rapport and build credibility and trust. This can only happen if both sides are heard. You've set the ground rules and the audience has agreed to listen to you first.

If someone in the audience interrupts your presentation with a question or remark, you should stop talking, give the person eye contact, and with a friendly face, a soft tone of voice and open body language say, "As we agreed, I will be happy to address that issue and any other questions at the end of my presentation." Remember, the members of the audience came to hear what you have to say, not to hear the remarks of a heckler.





MANAGING THE COURSE 303 CONSULTANT PROCESS

Current Trends are for Departments of Transportation, Local Public Agencies and other governmental entities to do more contracting of right of way and land acquisition services. This course is designed to provide students with a step-by-step understanding of the process of selecting and monitoring consultants. Issues are discussed relating to the contracting and monitoring of services from the perspective of the agency and consultant.

TOPICS:

- Understand the contracting process
- Avoid common mistakes and misunderstandings in the areas of proposal development
- Evaluate proposal submittals
- Monitor consultant work effort
- Become aware of the issues and concerns of both agencies and consultants as you discuss best practices methods of assuring success

INSTRUCTORS:

- W. Howard Armstrong, SR/WA, R/W-RAC, Senior Partner/Principal of Pinnacle Consulting Management Group
- James H. Finnegan, SR/WA, Senior Vice President, Western Division of Universal Field Services, Inc.

Class may be used to fulfill part of the education requirements for SR/WA designation and Certification program: 2 day/recertification: 16 hours

2003 DATES

May 21-22

June 9-10

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July 17-18

August 18-19

August 21-22

September 4-5

September 8-9

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DELIVERING THE PRESENTATION

Your presentation should be both informative and persuasive. The first order of business is to explain to the attendees why the “group of experts” decided the project is in the best interest of the public, and the reasoning behind why the decisions were made. The implicative approach, taught in IRWA’s Course 201 – *Communications in Real Estate Acquisition*, should be used: provide the proof before the conclusion. If the group of experts consists only of members within the agency you represent, reference the favorable comments authoritative sources and credible people outside of the agency made about the project. Next, inform or remind the audience which governmental body approved the project and why. This can be especially helpful if that governmental body was their local elected government officials.

PROVIDING PROJECT INFORMATION

The next step in your presentation is to furnish the audience with pertinent information on the project. Project details should include: the length of the project, where the project begins and ends, the number of involved properties, the construction schedule, and the expected completion of the proposed project. Be prepared to also explain the environmental, appraisal, acquisition and relocation processes; and any possible inconveniences the project will cause them during construction, as well as the perceived benefits the completed project will provide to the community. Do not withhold information

REHEARSING OUT LOUD

perceived as a negative aspect of the project from any member of the audience. You can be sure it will be raised during the question-and-answer session, so it is far better to bring them to light during your presentation.

There are three reasons why you should disclose all aspects of the project during your presentation: 1.) You may answer a number of questions that no longer have to be asked in the question-and-answer session; 2.) When a question is asked, you may be able to refer to your presentation, which could strengthen your presentation; and 3.) You will appear credible, knowledgeable and trustworthy because you provided pertinent information about the project, without technical jargon and interruption. The audience may no longer view you as the enemy, but rather the liaison that is going to help each of them work through the bureaucracy of the agency.

PERSONALLY GREET PEOPLE

When you know outspoken or difficult individuals are in attendance, be sure to greet them prior to the commencement of your presentation. Provide a refreshment table for attendees to socialize and relax. Avoid beverages containing caffeine, as it may

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give some of them hypertension or make them anxious. While the attendees mingle, you should be able to individually greet a number of people. For example, if you know Mrs. Mary Brown has an antagonistic attitude toward your project, you should greet her and express how glad you are she is in attendance. Your friendly approach might really take her by surprise. If she begins talking about the project or any controversial issue regarding your agency, interject her and sincerely say, "Mary [or Mrs. Brown, whichever is appropriate], please hold that idea for the question-and-answer session so your views can be heard and shared with all the people here today. I'll be sure to call on you when you raise your hand, or I will be happy to meet with you after the meeting. I just came by to say hello and that I'm glad you are here." Then excuse yourself and greet other attendees.

When Mary does raise her hand in the question-and-answer session, consider introducing her by saying, "I would like to next call upon Mary Brown [or Mrs. Brown]. Even though we are not in agreement on various aspects of this project, I very much appreciate Mary's point of view." Because of your gracious introduction, Mary should find it difficult not to be civil to you, and the audience members will have empathetic feelings toward you, rather than Mary, should her remarks attack you.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Anticipate

Make a list of the meanest, toughest, most hostile questions and remarks someone may hurl at you, your project or your organization. You should be able to predetermine these questions by reading the "Letters to the Editor" column in the local newspaper, by talking to your associates, and by keeping your eyes and ears open while in the community.

Prepare and Rehearse

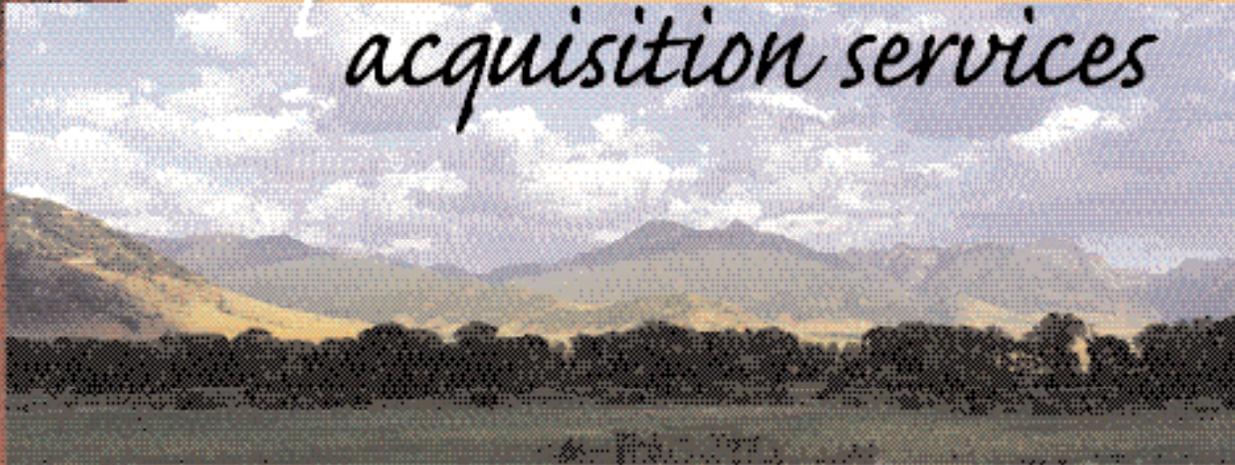
Answers to questions expressing worry, fear or pain should begin by acknowledging the questioner's feelings and desires.

Example 1: "I can certainly understand that you are concerned about the increased traffic the extra lane will attract; however, [name a benefit the additional traffic lane will provide to the community and remind the person why the "experts" and the governmental body approved the project]."

Example 2: "I can see that you would prefer the city construct the bicycle path on the other side of the street; however, traffic safety studies showed ..."

These questions should be predetermined and you should rehearse the answers, (preferably) out loud, either while driving in your car or in front of your bathroom mirror. The best preparation would be to have your associates ask you these predetermined questions as a group and then have them evaluate your answers. Rehearsing out loud builds confidence and makes it easier to say the lines in public.

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ENGAGE THE ENTIRE AUDIENCE

The question-and-answer session should be lively and should volley back and forth in a brisk manner. If the question requires a simple answer, keep your answer brief. Don't elaborate with an unnecessary lengthy answer as it may irritate and/or bore your audience. If a question does require a lengthy answer due to either codes or ordinances you need to look up, construction plans or right of way drawings you must locate, or for any other reason that requires more research, ask the questioner to hold the question and reply with, "I will be happy to answer that question; however, the answer will take a considerable amount of time to research. It would be most appreciated if you will allow me to provide the answer at the end of the meeting. In order to make my answer clearly understood, I will have to refer to some of the items I have brought with me. I know there are many people in the audience that have families waiting for them at home, or they have other commitments they must attend to, so let me first answer all the questions that require short answers." Your audience will appreciate your thoughtfulness. The same technique applies if someone refers to a drawing that can't be seen or understood by everyone.

If an audience member tries to dominate the question-and-answer session with dialogue or an argument, you must bring their discussion to a close. I would suggest saying, "Let me

answer this question, and then I must call on someone else. I'm sure you understand that I want to give everyone a chance to be heard. I would, however, be happy to discuss this further with you after the meeting."

You do not want to get into a discussion with one or two members of an audience; rather, you want to engage the entire group during the question-and-answer session.

FIFTY-FIVE PERCENT OF

LISTEN CAREFULLY TO THE QUESTIONS

Nonhostile Questions

Everyone wants to be listened to and, therefore, you must demonstrate that you are devoting 100 percent of your attention to this person and his or her question. Maintain eye contact, keep your facial expressions and body language friendly and open, and refrain from speaking until the questioner has concluded his or her remarks. If the question is nonhostile, paraphrase the question in your own words, out loud, so not only does the questioner know you understood the question, but you are sure the audience hears the question too. Even a friendly audience can become irritated if individuals seated at the back of the room can't hear or understand the questions being asked in the front of



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the room. Always paraphrase and repeat a nonhostile question. This courtesy allows you more time to gather your thoughts in response to the question.

Hostile Questions

A hostile question or remark should be listened to in the same way as a nonhostile question: eye contact, open and friendly facial

It is important to remain friendly and maintain your cool when handling hostile questions. The natural tendency is to lash out at this hostile person. Don't do it! Don't argue, don't raise your voice, and don't display unfriendly body language. You should stay calm and make empathetic remarks such as, "I can see you are upset," or "I understand where you are coming from." These non-confrontational statements do not mean you agree, but rather

ALL COMMUNICATION IS BODY LANGUAGE

expressions and body language, and without interruption to the questioner. However, you do not want to paraphrase and repeat a hostile question. For example: "Why didn't your agency pay my grandmother for the portion of property they took from her when your agency widened Fairview Avenue?" Do not repeat this question. If you don't know the answer, you should address the question with a short statement and a question. "By the laws of this state and in accordance with the Fifth Amendment of the United States Constitution, the agency must pay for property taken for a project. Can you tell us more about your grandmother's situation?" If he insists the agency took the property without payment, don't argue. Simply say that you will investigate what happened in front of his grandmother's home and call him within the next several days. If he says, "Well, the agency survey people said my grandmother's fence was located on the agency's property," you can then say out loud, "What you are asking is whether or not it is lawful for an agency to pay an adjacent property owner for land that already belongs to the agency just because the adjacent property owner's fence is constructed in the wrong location." After providing the appropriate answer in a friendly, sincere manner, end it by acknowledging his grandmother's feelings. "I can certainly understand why your grandmother was unhappy about the project. For years the property visually appeared to be hers, but legally it belonged to the agency."

Double Questions

If a person asks two nonhostile questions while speaking, address each question individually. "You have asked two questions. The first question ..." Paraphrase the question out loud to the audience and provide an answer. "The second question ..." Again paraphrase the question out loud and provide an answer. Using the method will make you appear very confident and trustworthy. If the two questions are hostile, they should also be addressed separately. Rather than paraphrasing the questions, utilize the same format stated earlier under answering hostile questions.



show you understand the other person's point of view with hope of calming the person's hostile state of mind. Avoid saying, "I know exactly how you feel," because you don't, and you can provoke an audience member to shout, "You don't have a clue how I feel." Keep in mind that some people just need to be heard. Once listened to, they feel much better and calm down.

Loaded Questions

Don't repeat negative words. If you are asked a question with loaded words such as, "Why is your agency ripping people off?" Don't repeat the negative words in your response as it will often lead to a confrontation: "My agency is not ripping people off." "Yes, they are." "No, they aren't." With this response you are giving the person the opportunity to pick you and your agency apart. Instead, rephrase your answer in positive terms by saying, "What the agency is doing is offering property owners just compensation, payment for the property proposed to be acquired in accordance with state laws and the Fifth Amendment of the United States Constitution." Tell them what your agency is doing, not what they are not doing.

Nonverbal Language

Research shows that 55 percent of all communication is body language. Therefore, it is very important that you are perceived as a confident, knowledgeable and friendly agency representative. This perception builds trust, and trust between a property owner and an agency representative is the most important element in the acquisition process. Avoid rolling your eyes or shaking your head during a question (disrespectful); hands on your hips, sheriff's stance or pointing your finger (threatening); folding your arms across your chest (defensive); or any other negative gesture. Even continually looking at your watch could be perceived as ill-mannered and rude, or slouching as weak and having a lack of self-confidence.

You should stand straight, arms at your side (except when gesticulating), palms of hands open, and display friendly facial expressions. Maintain eye contact and give undivided attention to individuals while they are asking a question; and provide eye contact to members of the audience during your presentation and when answering an individual's question. These nonverbal signals, along with the proper tone of voice and words, will make you appear confident, composed and concerned. Your skill at handling an audience may be the key factor that places the acquisition cost of a project below budget. ❖