



## CDFG, Marine Region

*Mission Statement: To protect, maintain, enhance and restore California's marine ecosystems for their ecological values and their use and enjoyment by the public*

# MANAGING DIFFICULT COMMUNICATION SITUATIONS VERBAL VICTORIES

## INTRODUCTION

Very few people enjoy being verbally "confronted" by others, yet such confrontations are often commonplace. Have you ever felt as follows when someone catches you "off guard":

"That attacker got the best of me. I responded off-the-cuff, without taking time to think. Now that I've had a couple of minutes to think the issue through, I have a much better response to the person's attack. But it's too late now; he's gone. He's mad at me, and I'm mad at him."

If you have ever felt this way, the "Verbal Victories" system is meant for you. One of the things the system teaches is how to "buy time" so you end up giving your best response, rather than simply blurting out the first thing that comes to your mind. The natural tendency of most people is to respond defensively to verbal confrontations by "standing your ground." This approach often makes the situation worse; it rarely leads to an open discussion of the issues at hand.

## THREE LEVELS TO SURVIVING

The key to surviving verbal confrontations is to have a system "in your hip pocket" that's specifically designed to both diffuse tension and resolve whatever conflict exists. An excellent method of dealing with external criticism is outlined by David Burns, M.D. in Chapter 6 of his book Feeling Good - The New Mood Therapy (New York: Signet, 1980). Dr. Burns proposes a system that lets a person handle verbal abuse and disapproval in a non-defensive manner. His approach uses three levels (they've been renamed and adapted some for the "Verbal Victories System"):

- Level One - Collect More Information
- Level Two - Agree with the Critic
- Level Three – Disagree Negotiably

## LEVEL ONE

Level One, Collect More Information, involves putting yourself in the other person's shoes to see the world as they do. Ask your critic specific questions to clearly define what is meant by his question or statement. Even if you know the person is wrong, try to be neutral, non-judgmental, and non-defensive in your questions. Keep delving deeper to really find out what's bugging the person. This not only lets you truly understand the person's concern, but also lets them vent steam. As Dr. Burns notes (p. 124), "this tends to defuse any anger and hostility and introduces a problem-solving orientation in the place of blame casting or debate." An example is given below:

- Critic: "I think dissolve shows where the slides fade into one another are a lousy way of presenting information."
- Speaker: "What do you feel is wrong with such shows?"
- Critic: "I simply don't think they're any good."
- Speaker: "Why not?"
- Critic: "Because the equipment required is too complicated!"
- Speaker: "Which equipment in specific seems complicated?"
- Critic: "The dissolve unit itself seems too complex to fiddle with!"

## LEVEL TWO

The second level is Agree with the Critic. Dr. Burns makes an excellent analogy between being under verbal attack and having someone shoot at *you*:

If someone is shooting at *you*, *you* have three choices: *you* can stand and shoot back--this usually leads to warfare and mutual destruction; *you* can run away and try to dodge the bullets--this often results in humiliation and a loss of self-esteem; or *you* can stay put and skillfully disarm *your* opponent. I have found that this third solution is by far the most satisfying. When *you* take the wind out of the other person's sails, *you* end up the winner, and *your* opponent more often than not will also feel like a winner.

Therefore, disarming involves finding some way to agree with the critic. If the critic is mostly right, this level is easy; *you* can at least agree in principle. If they're dead wrong, then *you* must find at least a grain of truth in their viewpoint or, at minimum, agree that it is understandable that they've taken such a stand based on the information available to them. Again, *you* must avoid being defensive or sarcastic. An example of disarming is given below:

- Critic: "The dissolve unit seems too complex to fiddle with."
- Speaker: "There's no question about it that there are a few buttons to push."
- Critic: "And figuring out how to properly connect all of the wires is just out of my league."
- Speaker: "I felt the same way when I first started preparing dissolve shows."
- Critic: "I still don't think audiences gain that much more *from* a dissolve show to make it worth the effort."

The speaker's non-defensive stance tends to take the steam out of the critic and get him in a mood to communicate. Dr. Burns calls this "...winning by avoiding battle" (p. 126). If *you* respond to the critic by defending *your* position, *you* simply increase the intensity of the critic's attack.

## LEVEL THREE

The final level is Disagree Negotiably. After empathizing with the person then disarming them, *you* finally get to give *your* point of view. You do so in an assertive yet tactful manner, with the aim of negotiating any remaining differences. Dr. Burns suggests the following (p. 128):

You can express *your* point of view objectively with an acknowledgement *you* might be wrong. Make the conflict one based on fact rather than personality or

pride. Avoid directing destructive labels at *your* critic. Remember, his error does not make him stupid, worthless, or inferior.

An example of disagreeing in a negotiable fashion is given below:

- Critic: "I still don't think audiences gain that much more *from* a dissolve show to make it worth the effort."
- Speaker: "I may be wrong, but my experience has shown that audience recall of information is higher in some situations with a two-projector, dissolve show. In fact, I've seen a research paper that supports my belief."
- Critic: "The research doesn't apply to my situations."
- Speaker: "Perhaps it doesn't apply. There are situations where a dissolve show isn't warranted. I have tried both single and dual projector shows and feel that *for* really important presentations, however, the dissolve effect is worth the extra effort with respect to audience retention of the message."

You may notice in the above example that an outside source of information (the research paper) was brought into the picture. This usually depersonalizes the discussion and makes it easier for the critiquer to understand the point you are trying to make. Dr. Burn's approach to dealing with criticism requires patience since you don't get to give your point of view until the end. However, this patience can make the difference between simply stating your viewpoint and having your viewpoint actually accepted by the audience.

### **WHEN THE THREE LEVELS APPROACH DOESN'T WORK**

Any approach to dealing with people won't work all of the time. Once in a while you'll have a true heckler in the audience who doesn't respond to the three-level approach described above. They are likely to be loud, non-compromising (dogmatic), and domineering. In other words, they're looking for a dogfight. Their extremely critical comments are often either inaccurate or off-the-track (sometimes off-the-wall), that is, they don't relate well to the main topic under discussion. You gain virtually nothing by trying to tackle them and may lose valuable time which could be spent answering more pertinent questions. In addition, you're most likely going to lose since you're probably giving the talk on their turf.

If you're too rough on such hecklers and shut them up, other members of the audience may feel afraid of asking subsequent questions. If you act afraid to even deal with the issue, then you may give the appearance that you tend to skirt controversial issues. The key to survival is to maintain control of the situation; don't let the heckler "grab the reins." Dr. Burns recommends the following approach (p. 131):

- Immediately thank the person for his or her comments;
- Acknowledge that the points brought up are indeed important; and
- Emphasize that a need exists for more knowledge about the points raised, and encourage the critic to pursue meaningful research and investigation of the topic.
- Finally, invite the heckler to share his or her views with you further after the close of the session.

This approach shows that you are open to hearing opposing viewpoints and that you don't feel you know everything about the issue. The main advantage is that you let other potential hecklers know that you won't enter into a dogfight in front of the audience,

where you are at a disadvantage, since you have the pressure of everyone watching you. Many hecklers are aware of their relatively safe position in the audience; they frequently aren't interested in battling one-on-one afterwards where the odds are more even. At the other extreme, some hecklers simply want a chance to express their opinions or show off in front of the crowd; once given this opportunity, they may be less of a hassle.

### **FURTHER ACTION**

If the heckler insists on continuing the debate, it's time for you to seek help. If you're working in tandem with one of your colleagues, this person may be able to think more clearly and handle the situation better, since they're not under the pressure of standing up front. Your host can also be a big help in such instances. He can tell the heckler that input is desired from other audience members; the speaker simply isn't in as comfortable a position to do so.

Don't forget one of your best allies, namely your audience. Ask them if they prefer to talk about the heckler's issue or go back to the main theme of your talk. You can also ask them if they would like a chance to provide input on the issue. In either case, the audience usually comes to your rescue. If not, do your best using the techniques described above then head for home as quickly as possible. After all, there are some "no win" situations where the odds are simply stacked too high against you. You can always win the next one.

### **HANDLING HECKLERS IN AN AUDIENCE**

Some key points to remember when speaking before a potentially hostile audience:

Hint #1: Thoroughly understand your audience's stance on the issue, prior to the presentation.

Hint #2: Work in pairs when making presentations.

Your colleague can help field tough-to-answer questions that you're having problems with simply because you're under the pressure of being in front of the audience.

Hint #3: Use your host as an ally.

Determine in advance how the two of you will handle the Q/A period (i.e., how you'll distribute questions evenly amongst the audience).

Hint #4: Establish ground rules with your audience during your introduction.

- Indicate whether the audience can ask questions during the presentation or only during the Q/ A period.
- Stress that only questions related to your topic will be fielded.
- Indicate that questions will be fielded from the entire audience (i.e., one person will not be allowed to "corner the market").

Hint #5: Divide and conquer.

For extremely hostile situations (such as public hearings):

- Break the audience into small work groups and have each one elect a spokesperson.
- Initially select one aspect/component of the issue at hand to delve into.

- Then ask each group to work on their own to come up with potential solutions to this aspect.
- Later, when you reconvene the entire audience, only allow the spokesperson from each group to speak. Group pressure will keep the person from presenting personal views that aren't representative of the group as a whole.
- Next, select another aspect/component of the issue to delve into.
- Ask each group to elect a new spokesperson, then put the groups to work.
- Again, only let the spokesperson speak when you reconvene. Repeat the process as needed.

Hint #6: Stick to your scheduled topic.

Don't let the audience steer-you toward other issues, unless you're qualified and prepared to talk about them.

Hint #7: Grab the reins when necessary (don't enter into a dogfight).

When a person dominates the Q/A session or asks off-the-track questions:

- First thank the person for his/her comment,
- Acknowledge that his/her thoughts are important,
- Suggest that more knowledge is needed on the subject and encourage the heckler to pursue research or investigation of the topic, and
- Immediately field a question from another person.

Hint #8: Use your audience as an ally.

When a heckler insists on dwelling on an off-the-track subject, ask the audience whether they want to continue this line of thought or if they have questions of their own they'd like answered.

Hint #9: Know when to exit.

When you identify a "no win" situation, courteously leave as soon as possible.

### **SOME HELPFUL REFERENCES ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

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