

Talking to Hostile Audiences

BEFORE THE MEETING

Analyze your audience.

What is the level of understanding? How much do they know?

What is the source of the hostility?

Generally hostility is associated with CHANGE. Inevitably things go badly as time goes on for certain people and certain groups of people. They experience a time of troubles. People visited by a time of troubles get upset. If the troubles continue they may become frustrated. One response to frustration and a perceived time of troubles is to seek change and alleviate the pain. They may become organized enough to put pressure on for change.

Others who have not defined themselves as having a time of troubles now feel threatened -- change is unsettling -- they may see a time of troubles of their own if the change goes through.

Others may fall somewhere along a continuum from one end of the line wanting change to the other resisting vigorously. These people may be somewhat troubled, ready to listen to possible changes, may be confused, unsure, somewhat threatened by a possible change but also curious, perhaps tempted, etc.

Those most strongly pinched and most strongly threatened are likely to be angry and emotional but before they can funnel their frustrations and emotions into action they have to explain what is going on. They have to account for their time of troubles.

They can turn the blame inward and explain their troubles as their own fault -- turning the blame inward arouses guilt -- People who turn the blame inward tend to suffer from depression. I'm no damn good -- I get what I deserve, etc. These people do not tend to lash

out at others in public meetings. However, many people turn the blame outward and focus the anger and hostility on outsiders. These are the people most likely to be hostile members of your audience.

The communication process by which individuals and groups explain the troubles that befall them is by developing and sharing a script.

Eric Berne the psychoanalyst maintained that each of us has a personal script and the way we play out that script has a good deal to do with our mental health.

Recently a team of Yale psychologists studied a sample of successful people, published writers, business executives, research biologists and compared them to a group of less successful people. They discovered that the successful people went through a crucial developmental period in the late teens and early twenties in which they developed THE DREAM, found a mentor, and decided on a career path. The dream was essentially a private script which mapped out their future, and imaginative drama in which the individual played the role of the leading character and enacted the hoped for successes. They found that the more closely the individual stuck to the dream the happier and more successful they were.

Similar scripts are developed by groups of people in the process of talking over their troubles and what they perceive to be threats to their positions. What a script does is organize a chaotic and often confusing situation into a coherent and logical explanation. The explanation takes the form of dramatic action in which the troublesome times are the focus.

The difference between the individual scripts and the group scripts is that in the process of communicating with one another about their troubles individuals come to share the same essential script. The group is thus held together because they share the explanation of reality.

The scripts most pertinent to our concerns are those that turn the blame of a time of

troubles outward and focus it on others -- OPEC -- Oil Sheiks -- Oil Companies --
Washington Bureaucrats -- City Hall -- unnamed conspirators -- the ubiquitous THEY who
are doing things to us. But while turning anger outward generates free floating hostility -- to
really release the hostility groups of discontented, threatened people need a real live villain --
some individual who can come to represent the source of their time of troubles. And who
plays the party of the heavy in their scripts -- Judge Bork, Edward Kennedy, Oliver North,
Tami Baker.

Most scripts also have a set of heroes -- people who represent us --

In order to be plausible the script requires that the villains have some motives for
causing our troubles and the more unsavory the motive the greater the hostility --

Here are some typical unsavory motivations in hostile scripts. The villains are drive
by power, mastery, manipulation -- they are power hungry -- power mad -- they are
lording it over us...

The villains love money -- they want to make a profit -- they are milking us for money
which they do not deserve -- they have been bought, bribed...

The villains love notoriety -- they like the spotlight -- they want to grab headlines...

In general villains are selfish and grubbing for mean miserable personal ends.

Whereas the heroes tend to be unselfish, sacrificing for the good of the entire
community.

For the most part the villains have consciously plotted and planned this nefarious scheme -- as soon as prices are high enough there will be plenty of gas.

Sometimes, however, the villains are not so much motivated by selfish concern as they are by dereliction of their duties. They are inept, bunglers, they are essentially stupid, lacking in common sense and empathy. They are (in George Wallace's words "Pointy headed bureaucrats who don't know enough to park a bicycle".)

Perhaps, the greatest rage and hostility results when the villains turn out to be in the pay not of human malefactors but to be under the control of supernatural forces of evil -- they are minions of the devil. Now the issue becomes on the morality, now it echoes down through eternity, and it may become a cause for which people will break the law, indulge in civil disobedience and proclaim their willingness to be martyrs for the cause. When the villains are knowingly and willingly committed to the forces evil the level of hostility generated by the script will rise to frenzy on occasion. Usually in such scripts the heroes are also inspired by supernatural forces for good. As Teddy Roosevelt said in the conclusion of his speech of acceptance as presidential candidate for the Bull Moose party -- "We stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord." Those who fight the battle for the Lord or for Allah against the forces of evil inspire high levels of commitment.

THE FIRST STEP IN ANALYZING THE ROOT CAUSE OF THE HOSTILITY IN THE AUDIENCE IS SCRIPT ANALYSIS.

What is the hostile audience members' definition of the time of troubles?

What is the basic story-line of the script?

Where is the locus of control? Who or what caused the time of troubles?

Who are the leading good people, the heroes of the script?

What motivates the good people?

Who are the leading bad people in the script? Are you or the individuals or institutions or agencies you represent among the villains. Are you likely to be associated with any of the villains? Which ones?

What motivates the bad people?

How high is the level of hostility likely to be?

If a battle good against evil, God against the devil -- the level is likely to be very high.

If a battle between scheming powerful people with low motives against decent honorable relatively powerless people of high motive -- the level is likely to be quite high.

If a problem caused by inept bumblers with no malice aforethought the level of hostility might be more moderate.

If the problem is largely caused by accident or chance or fate or circumstance and the solution is obvious but inept people seem to keep it from happening the hostility may be more moderate still.

You of course have a script of your own which may be the official script or some modification of it. If your private script departs drastically from the official script but you must present and defend the official scripts you may run into problems with nonverbal communication. The first person a good salesperson sells, goes the old saying, is himself or herself.

Your personal script may be generating some hostility for you as well and it would be good to get that out in the open for yourself as you make your plans.

NOW COMPARE THE TWO SCRIPTS

Are they mirror-image? That is are the heroes of one script the villains of the other and vice versa? Is the locus of control reversed? That is are the people causing the time of trouble in one the people trying to deal constructively with the trouble in the other? Mirror image scripts make compromise and consensus difficult. Conversion is one possible communication strategy but conversion is time-consuming and difficult. Detente or disengagement is another. Ignore, live and let live.

Are there some common heroes and villains? If so a common ground strategy may be possible. We might agree that we are all in the same boat and should try to keep it from sinking. A transcending strategy might be possible. That is if we go far enough back in the scripts we can find some superordinate goal which we share.

Do the scripts have a common locus of control? If we can agree on what is causing the problem we may be able to develop a strategy for transcendence. By rising far enough above the battle we discover we have a common enemy, common goals, values. Starting from these assumptions let's have a good thorough airing of our disagreement -- that is the American way -- that is the way we make decisions in a democracy -- that is why we are having this meeting, etc.

Do the scripts have a common ultimate legitimatizer for the last court of resort? Can we agree that we have the same God in mind?

WORKSHOP EXERCISE

Break into groups. Select one member's recent experience with a hostile audience or upcoming assignment with a hostile audience and make a script analysis with that person. Analyze both the scripts of various audience members and the individual's own script and the official script if there is one. Make some estimate as to the distribution of support for the various scripts in the audiences.

Possible Game Plans

Here I turn to research in conflict management and considerable work that has been done in terms of resolving marital conflict, conflict in small groups, etc.

Avoidance of conflict strategy.

The avoidance strategy is generally more comfortable, may keep publicity down -- easier in small groups where people find it difficult to be nasty to one another. In larger groups where speakers have their own supporters it is more difficult to avoid the conflict.

The avoidance of conflict strategy is a strategy to discount opposition and does not resolve the conflict. I don't know about that -- That's not my province -- We aren't the appropriate group to deal with that -- I will get you an answer later -- call our office and we can work it out later -- speak to me afterwards and I will give you somebody in another position who has the responsibility -- I understand that a task force will be formed. (The glories of passive voice)

The smoothing strategy -- really a twist on the avoidance may keep lid on conflict. Does not resolve conflict. This is just a misunderstanding. We are in essential agreement. You had the wrong idea about what we were up to. I'm sure now that the misunderstanding is cleared up things will be OK. Praise the heroes in their script. Deny low motives on your part.

The compromise strategy. A possible way to solve the problem. Nobody too happy but the problem is dealt with. Play up "reason" play down emotional elements of the script. "Let's stick to the facts we can agree on." "Let's not get into name-calling."

Let's find out what the basic issues are. Let's find out where we disagree and where we agree. OK we would be willing to give a little on that if you would agree -- fall into the negotiating mode. Sometimes helps to develop a team spirit. "I see what you mean. No you definitely have a point. Tell you what I'm willing to do. We'll work this out and I'll take it back and see if I can sell it to the home office."

The confronting and working through strategy. Supposed to be the best way of dealing with marital conflict, small conflict, etc. Confronts feelings and emotions as well involving "facts" and reason. OK we are in conflict. Let's see if there is a way we can settle this thing. I will listen to you and you explain your needs and feelings and what you would like to see happen as a result of this meeting. Then you listen to me and I will explain our position. Vigorous defense of your heroes and their motivations. Challenge to their heroes, demand assurances as to their motivations, search for common ground and transcendence. Now let's see if we can find some basis to work out an answer that we can all be happy with.

Implementing the strategy.

Introducing ideas to hostile audiences

1. The common ground introduction -- start with things that both speaker and audience generally approve of. Script analysis is vital here. Do not praise any of their villains or attack their heroes. Look for common locus of control or a common goal. If you need to use authorities to support you reach back for one

that you are likely to both approve of.

2. The blind or circuitous introduction. The speaker starts with almost anything (even though there is little tie-up with the speech) humorous stories, a variety of things that might arouse audience curiosity and calm hostility anger and other strong emotions.
3. Yes, yes, introduction: series of questions or barrage of generalizations that lead in to the subject but do not expose your position; audience can answer yes to each question or agree with each generalization. Script analysis is vital here too.
4. Inductive approach. A series of examples, illustrations, facts. You don't draw the conclusion. Let the audience come up with the right answer.
5. The absolute candor and honesty approach, speaker states frankly and honestly that there is a difference of opinion, but does so with such frankness and fairness that the audience is tempted to give him a hearing. Appeal to sportsmanship, sense of fair play, suggest that people with open minds are always ready to listen to the other side or different sides, that free speech is the essence of our heritage etc. Well adapted to using compromise strategy or confronting and working through strategy.

Workshop exercise

Return to groups. Select a spokesperson to represent the group. Use the script analysis from previous exercise as the basis. Develop a game plan. Spokespersons leave the room. Nature of hostility in audience explained by another member of the group. The hostile meeting is held and videotaped.

How to handle hecklers.

RIDICULE and scapegoat them.

COOPT them. Come forward. You can have five minutes to tell the audience what you want to say and I will comment.

CUT them up with a witty retort -- very difficult if you haven't the talent for it.

Treat them fairly and with good nature. Make them seem ill-humored and unfair. Turn crowd in your favor.