

VITAL SPEECHES

— OF THE DAY —

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VOL. LXX

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Dealing With Public Anger

NEW APPROACHES TO AN OLD PROBLEM

Address by KENNETH A. HASELEY, *The Ammerman Experience, Visiting Professor of Communications, Ivanovo State University, Russia*

Delivered to the Texas Association of School Boards and Texas Association of School Administrators Annual Convention, Dallas, Texas, September 20, 2003

In a scene from one of those instantly recognizable cartoons from *The New Yorker*, two top executives have just finished their presentations at the company's annual shareholders' meeting. Now it's the shareholders' turn to speak. There's a long line of angry people waiting at the microphone as the one executive whispers to the other, "This is the part of capitalism I hate!"

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Anger toward corporate America is on the rise. Executives today are facing shareholders who are angry about executive compensation, the company's stock price, accounting practices and more.

Across the country, battles are being waged between citizens' groups and large retailers, drug companies and health maintenance organizations. Helping fuel that anger are groups such as *Sprawl-Busters*, which show communities how to mobilize against corporate behemoths. Today, the *NIMBY* (not in my backyard) syndrome encompasses opposition to more than just power plants, landfills or factories.

And it's not just the private sector that's under attack. As all of you know, angry parents and residents are challenging all sorts of decisions being made by school boards, administrators and teachers.

Says Dr. Jimmy Creel, superintendent of Port Neches-Groves, Texas, Independent School District, "We deal with parents who become upset when the school imposes discipline they cannot or will not administer themselves. Sometimes parents are so angry they actually threaten physical violence. The threat is so real there's reason to believe they may carry it through."

Public anger is not new. But it is more common, more newsworthy and more damaging than it used to be. It is also more preventable and more manageable. In recent years, much has been learned about what causes public anger, and what works and what doesn't work when dealing with an angry public. Today, I'd like to offer some practical guidance on how to deal with individuals who are upset, angry, aggressive or verbally abusive in public. These techniques, which we've been teaching in a work-

shop on public anger, are based on case studies, behavioral models and proven psychological principles.

People who are angry hold two primary beliefs: one, that something is unfair, and two, that something is out of their control or that they are losing control. They believe that by expressing their anger, they will restore fairness or regain control. About 60 percent of angry people say they behave aggressively in order to repair their damaged self-image or to enhance their self-esteem. If you are confronted by an angry person, you must defuse that anger, and get the person to return to his or her "normal" level of functioning. How do you do that? Here are a few of the techniques we recommend:

* Prepare for stressful encounters. Begin with a self-audit. Ask yourself how you typically react to difficult people and stressful situations. Do you withdraw or clam up? Do you retaliate or escalate? This self-awareness can keep you from giving in to feelings or reactions that are counterproductive. You may even want to prepare for potentially difficult encounters by rehearsing with a neutral friend.

* Take preventive action. You can significantly reduce aggressive, disruptive behavior by making it easier to identify individuals, and by holding them personally responsible for their anti-social actions. For example, at a public or any group meeting, use nametags, have people identify themselves before speaking or testifying, and call on people by name whenever possible. This removes the anonymity that encourages people to behave angrily. If practical, greet audience members – shake their hands – as they arrive. This may be uncomfortable when you anticipate a hostile audience, but it could pay dividends in the form of audience cooperation, because people are less likely to lash out when they've made physical contact with you. And never leave a public meeting early.

* Ensure realistic expectations. Provide people with a road map of the meeting. Describe the agenda or sequence of events. Review the ground rules, including topics to be discussed, time limits for speaking, etc. In particular, assure people that they'll have an opportunity to speak.

* Sometimes, a good offense is the best defense. If you know that people are upset, begin the meeting or conversation by verbally acknowledging that you're aware that a problem exists or that people have concerns, and that you're eager to hear those concerns.

* Stay calm. Although the angry person may not be thinking clearly, you must be able to think clearly. For that to happen, proper breathing is critical. When confronted by an angry person, immediately make a conscious effort to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Take a deep breath – fill your lungs entirely, hold it for a few seconds, and then exhale. This will slow your breathing, relax you, and enable you to think clearly and respond calmly. Keep your neck, hand and shoulder muscles relaxed, and don't clench your teeth or jaw.

Some people make the mistake of personalizing what is being said to them or about them. Then they become defensive. Distance yourself psychologically from what you hear. Remind yourself that people say things for a variety of reasons, and don't dwell on their comments. Say to yourself, "I will remain calm," "This is not pleasant, but I can deal with it," or other such coping statements.

* Allow acceptable venting. Rather than trying to stop an outburst, it may be helpful to allow the angry person to let off steam. A good rule of thumb is to permit 1-2 minutes of uninterrupted venting. Keep in mind that people tend to run out of steam after a few minutes. During this venting period, don't offer advice or feedback. And don't tell the person to calm down; that's a request that requires a rational response when the angry person is most likely operating in an emotional mode.

Interrupt only if someone is verbally abusive. Respond politely, but firmly. One possible response: "I want to help you, but I find it difficult to do so when you use that kind of language. Please don't." Another strategy for dealing with verbal abuse is to ignore it the first time, responding calmly. Sometimes the angry person will begin to mirror your response as he or she recognizes what constitutes appropriate behavior.

* Find common ground. If you've ever debated in high school or college, you'll recall that one very effective debating tactic is to agree with something your opponent has said. The tactic is equally effective when facing an angry person. Even if you are unable to agree to a portion of what is said, chances are you can say that you agree with the person's goals, but disagree with his or her solution.

* Demonstrate empathy. One of the most effective ways of calming someone down is by empathizing with them or their situation, and showing that empathy. According to research, expressing empathy accounts for 50 percent of your credibility, and is assessed in the first 30 seconds. One way to empathize with an angry person is by recalling a similar experience of your own. Then respond succinctly and in an even, non-dramatic tone, with words that show concern and caring.

Some years ago, the plant manager of a chemical plant asked me to observe a public meeting for residents who lived near his facility. At one point, a woman stood up and angrily stated that she had three miscarriages, and was certain that they were caused by the plant's chemical emissions. The plant manager responded by citing a Johns Hopkins University study that showed no connection between the emissions and any ill human health effects. Think of how much better it would have been if he had first said to the woman, "I'm sorry to hear that. I have two children of my own, so I know how precious a life is." Then he could have mentioned the research study. Remember, you must connect with people on an emotional level before you can reach them on an intellectual level.

Express concern, but avoid the often-said, but ineffective statement, "I understand how you feel." No one – including psychiatrists – can fully understand another person's feelings. Instead, consider a response such as this: "I know someone with a similar problem, and I can only imagine how you must feel."

* Listen actively. Most of us spend 70-80 percent of our waking time communicating; nearly half of it – some 45 percent – is spent listening. But we are poor listeners. We listen at an efficiency rate of only 25-50 percent. One reason for this is that the average person speaks at a rate between 150-200 words per minute (WPM), but we can hear at a rate of at least 600 WPM. That leaves a lot of time for our minds to wander. Another reason is that when someone is talking – especially someone who's angry – most of us are thinking about how we're going to respond. Resist this impulse. Pay close attention to what the angry person is saying (or not saying).

Listening is hard work. When you listen actively, your pulse goes up and you breathe faster. To listen effectively, and to show that you are listening, do the following: Take notes. Repeat or paraphrase what the speaker has said. Ask questions. Ask the speaker to clarify or elaborate on what was said. Don't interrupt. Look at the speaker.

If the angry person begins to "withdraw," here are five words guaranteed to get and keep that person talking: "Tell me more about it."

* Admit mistakes. A straightforward acknowledgment of error and sincere apologies go a long way toward changing the behavior of angry people. When appropriate, provide a prompt, verbalized, public admission that a problem occurred or that something could have been handled better. And remember that there is a difference between accepting blame and accepting responsibility.

* Focus on solutions. Quite often, people who are angry are willing to spend long amounts of time rehashing the problem. Your role must be to help shift the discussion from the problem to the solution. You can do so by providing guided problem solving. Ask future-oriented questions: "If you could have the ideal situation, what would that

be?” Offer suggestions of your own: “Here are some other possible options to consider.”

* Anticipate . . . and plan for problems. I once saw a CEO “freeze” when a group of demonstrators (wearing costumes) stood up during his speech and silently held up signs and banners. He was so rattled he didn’t know what to do, so he kept on speaking. Not surprisingly, no one in the room heard (or cared about) a word he said once the theatrics began.

Unlike that executive, you should know exactly what you’ll do if an audience becomes hostile. The time to develop a strategy for dealing with an angry public is not during the meeting, the event or the encounter. Have a plan clearly in mind before arriving.

First off, keep your composure – no matter what!

If you’re interrupted, politely ask the individual to hold his or her question or statement, and allow you to finish your remarks. Address that individual; don’t direct your response to the entire audience. Let people know the consequences of disruptive behavior: “I’ll call security if you don’t stop yelling.”

Appeal to the audience’s sense of fair play. Tell them you’re trying to share information or that people have invested valuable time to attend the meeting, and that interruptions are unfair. Politely, but authoritatively, explain that nothing can be accomplished when people are rude or fail to cooperate.

Be prepared to temporarily jettison prepared remarks, PowerPoint presentations or the agenda, and seek input from the audience.

If the situation becomes extremely tense, call for a short break. Then appeal directly to those who are angry for their cooperation.

If you cannot regain control, indicate that perhaps the best approach is to adjourn and reschedule the meeting after tempers have calmed down. This is a better approach than allowing the meeting to spiral out of control.

* Heed warning signals. We live in a different world today – a more violent one. So watch for visible signs of anger: a red face; a change in voice – louder or softer, slower or faster; standing up, perhaps invading your personal space (3-6 feet is generally a safe distance). Never touch someone or physically try to force someone to leave. If you hear threatening language, don’t respond by saying, “Is that a threat?” Instead, say, “That sounds to me like a threat, and I take threats very seriously.”

A final point. Americans, being practical people, are problem solvers. When faced with a problem, we want to resolve it quickly and move on. But keep in mind that where anger and problems co-exist, no problem can be resolved until the anger is addressed. So, when encountering an angry public, your initial objective may simply be to address the anger . . . not the problem.

Thank you very much.

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