

## FORTY THREE

# Handling large audiences

Many articulate people, persuasive and authoritative with small groups, are terrified of large audiences. There's no need to be. If you can cope with the few, the many are much easier. Simply treat them as a small audience, writ large.

Essential rules:

- Do not change your style
- Do not change your personality
- Do not try to be someone else (Chapter 8)
- Just be yourself – but project yourself outwards, through widening your eye contact and projecting your voice.

Experienced speakers look around for kindly faces. Even in the most hostile gathering, you'll usually find someone with a friendly or tolerant smile. Or you could plant a colleague, friend or relative in a good position. So start talking to the friendly face. Then turn your head and your eyes on to others. Deliberately, and at intervals of about five seconds.

Speakers who look over the top of their audiences, out into space, indulging in soliloquy, are only a mite better than those who keep their heads lowered and mumble into notes. Audiences are people. They want to be entertained. They have come out of interest or curiosity or duty, or all three. Grab, then keep, their interest by talking to them – and not over their heads, literally or metaphorically. Look at them. Speak to them. Target your audience (Part 1).

India's leaders must be prepared to speak to audiences of any size, up to tens of thousands. I asked Prime Minister Atal Behar Vajpayee, famous for

his oratorical skill, for his secret. How does he keep such huge crowds gripped by his words and style. He replied:

‘Speak from your heart to their hearts. It is not enough to stimulate their intellects.’

So identify your listeners. Discover where their hearts lie and talk to them from your heart to theirs. Combine heart and mind. Ask:

Are they skilled or unskilled, simple or learned, well versed in your topic or new to it, likely to be friendly or hostile? If you are working on a private business deal, you tailor your talk to the nature, personality, interests and sensitivity of your listener. Only common-sense? Well, if more speakers would apply that same sense to their audiences, the market for speaking would not be spoiled. People would attend meetings, instead of preferring their TVs. And speakers would be much more successful than most of them are.

Whatever and whoever your audience may be, watch them while you speak. See whether they are concentrating, or shifting around in their seats. If you have held them still for some time, stop. Pause. Take a sip from your glass of water. Sort through your notes. Give your audience the chance to relax and then to resetttle. No one can concentrate for more than two or three minutes without a break.

If your audience is restless when you want it to be still, restore your hold on it. If you have been serious, toss in a joke, a story or an anecdote. If you have been speaking at high volume, then switch to a confidential tone. If nothing works, then wind up – either permanently or for an extended question time.

There is no more important rule for speakers than to keep a hawk-like watch on their listeners. It is different, of course, if you are talking to yourself. Ignore this rule and you soon will be.

One of the speaker’s problems is where to look. Facing your audience and fixing them with your eye is a problem. Why? Know the reason and the problem becomes easier to beat. Consider two other paragraphs in Desmond Morris’s *The Naked Ape*.

‘A professional lecturer takes some time to train himself to look directly at the members of his audience, instead of over their heads, down at the rostrum, or out towards the side or back of the hall. Even though he is in such a dominant position, there are so many of them, all staring (from the safety of their seats), that he experiences a basic and initially uncontrollable fear of them. Only after a great deal of practice can this be overcome.

‘This simple, aggressive, physical act of being stared at by a large group of people is also the cause of the fluttering “butterflies” in the actor’s stomach before he makes his entrance on to the stage. He has all his intellectual anxieties about the qualities of his performance and its reception, of course, but the massed threat of all those people is an additional and more fundamental hazard.’

There it is. We fear those who stare at us. If you want to lift your head above the crowd, you must expect people to stare at it. Learn to look right back.

If you want your audience to be hooked onto your theme and to accept your message, then involve it – from the start. Think and talk about ‘You’. Identify the individuals and their interests with your words. Insert the hook and keep it tight, through audience involvement techniques.

First and most important: ask questions. These may be either real or rhetorical (*see also next chapter*).

When you address an audience, however huge, you can always ask them: ‘How many of you are company directors... lawyers... members of... ? Please would you raise your hands if you are? Thank you. Now consider: how does this problem affect each of you, individually?’

Or: ‘So we’re talking about the law on health and safety. How many of you have never seen a serious accident on the road? Is there anyone? Please put up your hand, if you never have? Not many... So whether on the roads or at work, accidents are not other people’s problems. They are ours... yours... mine. And it’s up to us to try to prevent them, isn’t it?’

So you began with the real; and you ended with the rhetorical – questions that people are meant to ask themselves but are not expected to supply an answer for.

When lecturing on the law on dismissals, this is how I often began: ‘You have been sent here by your companies, your organisations, or your businesses – at minimal expense – so that you may learn how to dismiss lawfully, fairly and at minimal cost. That’s why you’ve been sent.

‘Now, why have you come? It’s so that you can learn how *you* can get the most money out of *your* employers, when *you* are dismissed from *your* job! Knowing one or two of you as I do, you had better pay attention, hadn’t you?’

If you want to rivet your audience from the start, that’s the way to do it. ‘ – Use ‘You’s’ – plus questions. You are articulate and you know your subject or you would not be making the speech. So why not stop after each area or theme or part of your talk and say: ‘Now, have I made that clear?’ Or: ‘Has anyone any questions on what I’ve covered so far?’ Even if no one answers, everyone will be pleased to have been asked. And anyway, you’ve used audience involvement to break up your talk and to lighten the darkness.

Next: personal allusions. Refer and sometimes defer to individuals in your audience. Thus:

‘Mr Brown, you’re Chairman of this Company. What do you think about that suggestion?’

‘Mrs Brown, you had a case like that, didn’t you? What happened was that...’

‘The real problem has been how to get others to follow the route so well and carefully laid out by Tom...’

‘We salute Jane, John and Albert, for the way that they have...’

There’s no end to the possibilities. Just be careful not to offend, either directly, by allusions that will upset those individuals, or indirectly, by referring to some, who will be flattered, at the expense of others whom you do not mention and who will be upset. As usual, pre-plan.

Next: you can often involve individuals by asking them to make specific contributions to the discussion. ‘Mr Green, you’ve handled this sort of problem. How did you cope with it?’

Or you can bring people into the laughter, by gentle teasing. If you know the audience, that's easy. If you do not, then ask someone who knows, in advance: 'Who's a good sport? Who'll join in with a laugh?'

As a speechmaker, you have (by definition) a live audience. Keep them living by involving them, using them, enlivening your talk with their concerns, their interests and their voices.

Be sensitive about time. If your listeners look at their watches, watch yours. You will know that time is on their minds. So move on... discard cards... move to your close. Or perhaps involve the time watcher: 'I'm sorry... but we are coming up to our time limit. Mr White, are there any other points which you would like me to deal with?'

So, do your research. Keep your personality and your style. Understand and defer to the sensitivities of your audience. Make friends with them and all should be well. Do not go all pompous because there are lots of them. Enjoy dealing with many people as you would with a few and you'll find that it can be easier to talk to a large audience than to a small one. The fewer the people, the nearer they are to you...

## FORTY FOUR

# Questions and hostility

Afraid of questions? Worried about hostile interrogation? Then recognise a few truths, follow some basic rules, study some special techniques – and relax.

Recognise first that it is usually far easier to respond to questions than it is to grip an audience with a set piece. So, do not say: ‘I’m going to talk to you for twenty minutes and then I’ll answer your questions.’ Instead: ‘I’m going to talk to you about... I’ll be glad to answer your questions as we go along or at the end. But please do not hesitate to interrupt.’

Dangerous, you ask? No – and here’s the real key – if you know your subject. If you are properly fully prepared (Chapters 1 and 24), you should have no problems. If you are not prepared, then – emergencies apart – you should not be making the presentation.

**Special tip:** if you are likely to be questioned, work out in advance those questions which you find most difficult to answer. Or get a colleague, or a friend, to do so for you. Then sort out the best replies – always with a careful eye on the four questions (Chapter 1): *Who* are your audience? *What* do they want? *Why* are you speaking – what’s your message? So: *How* should you respond to their queries?

There are twin joys to this approach. If you are asked questions, you will know the answers. And if you are not asked, so much the better. Knowing that you can cope with the interrogation, if you get it, will help give you that confidence, so vital to calm your nerves (Chapter 1 on the ‘Confidence Trick’).

Your problem as a speechmaker is not how to answer questions, but how to capture and hold the interest of your audience. Consider: If you are having a discussion with colleagues or friends, or a business or a social argument, you will know how to ask and how to answer. Then why should it be more difficult, when you are faced with a larger audience?

So instead of avoiding questions, invite them. Use real questions: ‘Can anyone here tell me...’ ‘Please raise your hands if you have been involved in...?’ ‘Any questions on that?’ Or rhetorical questions: ‘I don’t suppose anyone here has come across... have you?’ Or, ‘We all enjoy a happy occasion, don’t we?’ You expect no answer.

If you get your questions, answer them. Whether you are in a private meeting or on a public platform... in a court or in a tribunal... or even in private conversation, the central rules are the same:

- Think before you speak. Take your time. Most people believe that to hesitate is to lose. On the contrary: the thoughtful pause not only shows confidence but also respect for the question – and for the questioner.
- To gain time, use the professional’s tricks. Sip at your glass of water... deliberately remove your spectacles... deliberately change your position. *Deliberately* – that’s the key. Use silence as deliberately before you answer questions as you do the pause, when speaking.
- The more difficult the question, the slower and the more careful should be your reply. If you need time to think, don’t ‘um’ or ‘er’ or use ‘um’ phrases, like: ‘Now, that’s a very interesting question that certainly deserves an answer. So may I say right from the beginning that basically...’
- Try to answer the question you are asked and then qualify the answer, if you wish. Try those unfamiliar words: ‘Yes’ or ‘no’. Then say: ‘But please remember that...’ Or, ‘But, there are some special complications.’ Straight questions deserve straight answers.
- If you do not know the answer, you could say so. Or try this technique: ‘That’s an important question. I wonder whether any of you have come across the answer?’ If anyone has, then ask: ‘What did you find?’ Or, ‘What was your solution?’ Then you’ve dug the answer out of your audience. If no one responds, then say: ‘Now, it’s a fair and interesting question and no one here knows the answer. I don’t either. But I’ll find out for you and let you know.’ Shared ignorance is much more acceptable. Of course, you can’t use that trick more than once in any session.

- Finally, keep your composure when asked and answering questions. Think of body language... eye contact... pause and pace – and keep your head and voice up.

A ‘gentleman’ is a man who is never unintentionally rude. Mature speakers never unintentionally lose their temper. They also try to cause offence only by design. Outside politics, most wounds are both regrettable and regretted. In one off-guard moment, you may acquire an enemy for life, unnecessarily.

Now, five basic rules for coping if your audience does get enraged:

- Listen – don’t argue. Keep calm
- Empathise – and apologise
- Look for common ground
- Offer alternatives
- Follow up

Never argue with an angry person. The angrier the protagonist, the less you should argue. Instead: listen. Give the complainant a hearing. Communicate your understanding through your silence. If the person is normally passive, listen with abnormal care. Beware the anger of a patient person. When the volcano has blown itself out, show and express your understanding. Think how you would feel if you had been in the same position. Even if the entire misery is based on misunderstanding... is not your fault... is open to explanation or even to challenge – wait. Your time will come.

Meanwhile, try a variant on the following:

- ‘You are right. I know exactly how you feel.’
- ‘I am so sorry. I do understand.’
- ‘Yes, it should not have happened. I am very sorry.’
- ‘If that had happened to me, I would feel exactly as you do. I am sorry.’

Then the follow-up:

- ‘I know it’s not the same, but I wonder if it would help to...’

- ‘Look, I know that nothing can replace your time lost, but we would be very glad if you would be our guest at... accept a complimentary copy of/session at...’
- ‘Let me try to fix an alternative which will be at least as good/better in the long run – and which I will make sure will cost you less/will not cost you more.’
- ‘Let me try and put things right for you. May I suggest... How about... Perhaps you would like to... Why not try... Maybe it would help to... ?’
- ‘Let’s postpone the decision until next week... set up a special committee to deal with it...’

It follows that, the laws of defamation apart, it is best to keep discussions on ideas, not personalities. If you do attack opponents, be sure of your ground. Make certain that their discomfiture is intended and that it has a reasonable chance of leading to the results you seek. Whether you are speaking at a comparatively small meeting or a mighty gathering, be careful. You are not alone. If your attack is ill-chosen, you may turn your supporters against you.

If you must attack a personality, then prepare your case well. Gather your documentation: letters, quotations, firm facts and witnesses. The more bitter your resentment, the quieter and the more apparently reasonable your tone should appear. Lose control of yourself and you will probably, and deservedly, also lose control of both situation and audience. Find out in advance whether your words are likely to be well received. There is no worse time to be shouted at, or voted down, than during a personal attack.

If the moment arrives for a personal vendetta, select your time and place with care. By launching an attack, you invite a counterattack. By mentioning the names of your opponents you may give them the publicity that they seek plus – in the eyes of those who believe in fair play – the moral right to reply. Instead of being in sole occupation of the platform, you may have to surrender it to an opponent whom you would prefer to lurk unseen and unheard.

If your opponents descend to personal attack, it is rarely wise to lower yourself to their level. Your object, after all, is to win your case – to convince your audience of your rectitude, of the usefulness of your activities, of the excellence of the way in which you are running the business – or, conversely, of your opponent’s error. The sharp intellect is a better weapon than the rough tongue. When the theme is laced with incivility, the audience may suspect a lack of factual backing or of self-control – or both.

Delaying tactics can sometimes be appropriate:

- ‘That’s a good point. Let’s discuss it later... Are you free for a drink after the meeting?’
- ‘Let’s discuss that. But before we do, shouldn’t we look at... or... and...?’ In other words: create diversions – or as magicians call it, misdirection.

Finally: follow up. You have staved off the confrontation or even won your way? You have won agreement to resolve the disagreement? Then confirm it in writing – and reaffirm it by carrying out any duties or obligations, which you may have yourself accepted.

Psychiatrists, psychologists, skilled cross-examiners – all will tell you that unless you wish to provoke greater hostility, you must meet aggression with calm and with understanding. Relate... empathise... apologise, even if you have no real cause. Then offer your alternatives. One or more may be acceptable. Then check up to ensure that an accepted offer turns into reality.

Hostility breeds hostility and an aggressive approach invites an aggressive response. Surprise your critics with your moderation, your understanding and your sensitivity, and by listening with care and respect. They may mellow or moderate their views. Anyway, that approach is more likely to succeed than frontal counter-attack. If you must lose your temper, then do so with deliberation. Choose your moment and your words with equal care. If you must tear at your opponent, do it successfully.

If you must face potentially hostile questioning in public, whether at a meeting or (especially) on radio or TV (Chapters 41 and 42), prepare, rehearse and train. If you are at the receiving end of public attack, especially in or by the media, there are three general rules for response:

- Don't be defensive
- Don't sue – unless grossly provoked, and
- Don't read, watch or listen to the media.

Let it flow over you. Tomorrow it will be someone else's turn. Your ordeal will be forgotten, remarkably soon – by everyone other than you.

## FORTY FIVE

# Interruptions

Interruptions are to the skilled speaker as raids to the commando – a challenge to draw on resources and to test the mettle. From the platform or top table, the speaker has a total advantage. Handled properly, your hecklers can rouse your audience and put them on your side. The unexpected break should add variety to a dull occasion.

To reap the benefit of useful interruption, you must be alert. Tied to a script – written or memorised – you will be thrown off balance. If you cannot think on your feet, stay seated.

Consider some common examples. Take the shareholder who comes to a company meeting to criticise. He shouts interruptions. How do you deal with him?

Maintain your dignity. Make quiet but firm appeals for a fair hearing. ‘I appreciate that you have a point of view to express and you will have your chance to do so. Meanwhile, please have the courtesy to listen.’ Or: ‘I ask you to give my viewpoint the same fair hearing that I have given to yours.’ Or: ‘I listened to your case without interrupting. Please accord the same courtesy to mine.’

You could try: ‘If you would be good enough to listen to what the Board has achieved and is now proposing in the present difficult circumstances, you will learn something to your benefit.’ If the moment has come to attack, try: ‘If you would listen to me, sir, instead of to yourself, you would be doing all of us a favour.’

If the speaker’s coping, the Chair should not intervene. If the meeting gets out of hand, then he or she must do so. At best, this will bring calm; at worst, the interrupters will be asked to leave. Still, a wide-awake speaker can usually keep the audience in reasonably good humour and win a hearing without the use of force.

Some interruptions are healthy and helpful – whether or not this was their intent. Humorists’ outcries can often be turned against themselves. The scream of a jet engine overhead may drown you for the moment, but gives you the opportunity to draw some moral about the point you are making. Even a friendly remark addressed to a member of your audience arriving late may save you both from embarrassment, as well as giving you the opportunity you may in any event need to sort yourself out, to vary the pace of your talk, or to give your audience the chance to relax for a moment, to shift about in their seats and to prepare for the rest of your speech.

You must show self-confidence and self-command, to achieve command of the situation and of your audience. If you are needed by interrupters and tempted to panic – pause, smile and retain control. The rowdier the meeting, the more disconcerting the interruption, the more aggravating the break in your train of thought, the more important it is for you to demonstrate to your audience that you will not be thrown off your balance. Lose control of yourself and all is lost.

Go to first-class political meetings and watch accomplished politicians at work. Listen to them provoking then downing their hecklers. Observe as they prompt their audience to turn on the interrupters. A few inefficient hecklers will do their work for them, rouse their supporters, bring the uncommitted to their side and enliven what might otherwise be a dreary occasion. The more spontaneous the reply, the wittier the retort, the speedier the counter-attack, the more effective the speaker and the speech. A weak riposte now is better than the brilliant barb that you afterwards wish you had thought of at the time.

Do not let interrupters put you off your stroke. Use them – to your advantage.