

PART 4: NEXT STEPS

HANDLING RESISTANCE: In the Classroom or at a Speaking Engagement

(The following section was written by Warren J. Blumenfeld for the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Speakers Bureau of Boston's *Speaking Out* Manual.)

Occasionally, you might be invited to speak before an audience you know will be unreceptive to the information you want to present, or you might encounter hostility from a few individuals within the group.

Hostility can be seen as a symptom of a host of emotions such as anger, fear, or hurt. Hostility might be a direct expression of insecurity around the basic emotional issues of human sexuality, or can be placed in "religious" or political terms. For those expressing it, hostility is serving some sort of function. It is not so much about attacking you as it is about filling a need in them.

Hostility might be manifested in a variety of ways, such as defensiveness, obstructiveness, yelling, arguing/debating, disrespectful laughter, or pointed silence and withdrawal, often manifest vividly through body language.

Verbal hostility can range from a simple question with veiled hostility, to an outright statement like: "You people disgust me!" to a persistent attempt to disrupt the entire engagement to make a point.

Remember, in all likelihood you will not change this person. Do not try to convince or get involved in power struggles with hostile members of the audience. If there is any name-calling involved, do not throw it back. Within the short amount of time you have, you will not convince those who are firmly entrenched in their prejudices.

Try to avoid taking personally any expressions of hostility. You might feel a tremendous amount of anger directed toward you, but in the majority of cases these feelings have absolutely nothing to do with you personally. You may represent issues that many people are struggling with themselves. You can distance yourself from the hostility by reminding yourself and your audience of this.

Be comforted to know, however, that most of your audience, even if they disagree with you, do not want to see you harassed. If you can handle a potentially hostile situation effectively, you will win some points. Ultimately, you are in charge, and you can set the tone. The presence of hostility, in a limited number of people, does not mean you are alone or that you have lost control of the situation. When you enter a potentially hostile situation, it is good to remember two basic objectives:

∇ Manage the Hostility. ∇ Maintain Your Personal Integrity and Comfort Level.

Though there are no set rules on how to attain these objectives in a speaking engagement, what follows are some strategies for trying to defuse or redirect resistance or hostility. These strategies have been compiled by Warren J. Blumenfeld and other members of the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Speakers Bureau, with the assistance of Cooper Thompson of the Campaign to End Homophobia.

Post or State “Guidelines”

Whether you are a classroom teacher or other school staff member, or a speaker/facilitator from outside the group you are invited to address, it is a good idea to begin by posting or stating a series of guidelines setting the parameters for discussion. As stated above in “Classroom Guidelines,” these guidelines include:

∇ All questions and opinions are appropriate to share. ∇ People need to respect all ideas, with no attacks or blame. ∇ Speak from personal experience; avoid generalizations; do not attempt to speak for others. ∇ Share air time. Take turns speaking; listen respectfully with no interruptions. ∇ Respect people’s right not to participate in the discussion. ∇ Be open to change some of your assumptions or opinions on the topic. ∇ Anonymity must be respected. People can share information about this discussion with others outside the class only if class members’ names and other identifying characteristics are not used.

Ignore the Hostility

Sometimes the best tactic to take is simply to ignore a hostile comment coming from the audience. This often works when the comment is an off-hand remark rather than a direct question or statement.

Acknowledge the Hostility

You can also acknowledge that you are aware of the comment, without necessarily agreeing with the person, and move on without responding further. Acknowledgment can be given by a slight shake of the head, or simply by saying “I’ve heard what you said,” or “That is interesting.” You might want to recognize the person’s feelings without directly responding to the comment or question, and then proceed. For example, “I can see that you have some strong opinions about this issue.” If a question or comment has little to do with the topic under discussion, you might simply make this known and move on.

Deflect the Hostility

Appreciate people for asking questions and recognize their feelings. “Thank you for your honesty in making that comment. Many people have similar concerns.” You can then decide to address the comment (“In my experience, however, I’ve have found that ...” or “I do not agree. However, here’s what I think...”), or move on.

A good strategy can be to toss the question back to the questioner: “That is an interesting question, what do you think?” Or, to give yourself a bit more time to formulate your response: “Can you say more about what you mean?” You can also toss the question to the entire group, where you may find allies: “I have my opinions on this question, but before I give my response, I would like to hear from some of you. Does everyone here agree with that view?”

Co-opt the Hostility

You can agree with or support a portion of the person's statement while making a point supporting your own position: "It is true that some gay males are raised in families that might be defined as having a distant father and overbearing mother, but so are some people who are heterosexual. By no means is this the only kind of family situation that gay males, lesbians, and bisexuals grow up in."

Treat a question or comment intended to bait you as if it were legitimate and use your answer as an opportunity to provide other information. Be aware of the **underlying assumption, stereotype, or question** beneath the question that is actually being asked.

Audience Member: To a lesbian — "You're just here to pick up women."

Speaker: "You raise an interesting point. There is a stereotype that lesbians only have sex on their minds and want to 'convert' heterosexual people. For me, I have been in a loving relationship with another woman for over five years, and I'm really not interested in having sex with anyone else."

Sometimes you can silence a person's disruptive behavior, or potentially even win that person over, by providing accurate information to contradict the myths and negative stereotypes that result in hostility. Explain to the audience in general, as well as to the person who asked the question, what assumptions you think are being made. Try to give a calm alternative to the comment.

Audience Member: "If everyone were homosexual, humanity would be destined to extinction."

Speaker: "Even if one day there were only gay males and lesbians in the world (which, by the way, I think there is little chance of), humanity would not be destined to extinction because lesbians and gay males can and do produce and raise children."

Though you should not take hostility personally, you can frequently personalize the issues by relating your own experiences and giving a number of personal anecdotes to support your position. Let your audience see your humanity, your humor, your joy.

Address Repeated Hostility

If an audience member continually interrupts with hostile comments, you might wish to address this disruption by allowing the member a few minutes to say anything he or she needs to say, after which time the disruptive member agrees to let other people speak: "You obviously have a point you want to make. Why don't you take two minutes to say whatever it is you want to say without interruption. Then we will go back to the general discussion (or presentation) without further comments from you. Go ahead, you have two minutes."

Alternatively, you could give a disruptive person the opportunity to share concerns either at the break or following the engagement: "We don't have time now to continue with this particular point, but I will be available at the end of the discussion to talk with you about this matter."

Move Beyond the Hostility

Focus your comments on audience members who want to learn. You can do this by addressing the disruptive individual ("I'm aware that you have asked a lot of questions, and I really need you to hear that I want you to allow others in the room to ask theirs.") or by addressing the group as a whole: "We seem to have a difference of opinion that I don't think we can resolve today. Since we're all here to learn, let's move on to other people's questions." or "It seems that we will not be able to reach agreement on this

point right now, so I suggest we agree to disagree.” or “I think I’ve already answered that, so let’s give some other people a chance to ask their questions.” or “I’m aware that people in the back of the room have some concerns. Would you like to share them with the rest of us?”

There are, of course, many other strategies to deal with resistance and some of those listed might not be suitable to your individual style of presentation. Talk with other facilitators about their strategies and experiences, and spend some time thinking about how you might react to and deal with these kinds of situations. Above all else, you should consider your own well-being to be your top priority. On those rare occasions when the atmosphere gets too strained, do what you need to do to take care of yourself and don’t worry about how well or poorly the workshop might turn out.

(Thanks to Pat Griffin and Janice Doppler of the Social Justice Education Program, University of Massachusetts -Amherst for their input into this paper.)

ON HARASSMENT AND INVISIBILITY: TWO STUDENTS’ STORIES

Nobody tells Latino kids in the high school that nobody cares if they’re Hispanic so long as they keep it to themselves. Jewish kids aren’t told that they’re sinners, and they could change into Christians if they wanted to. People don’t tell black kids they should put up with racism because they’ve come so far from when they were slaves. They don’t have to defend why there is a black history month, or why people want black studies included in the curriculum. People don’t say, “That’s so Korean!” when they mean something is stupid or weird. People don’t tell disabled kids that the community isn’t ready to defend their equal rights and inclusion yet. You never hear any one argue that breast cancer is God’s way of killing off the women, and it’s a good thing. If a teacher hears anyone use a slang insult for a Chinese kid, they jump on it. When foreign exchange students ask teachers about dating in the school, they aren’t sent to see a guidance counselor.

But every day in the high school, I hear it’s okay if I’m gay so long as I stay in the closet, that I’m an abomination against God, that I can change if I want to, and that people like me shouldn’t be taught about in school. I’m told I should be satisfied because our school is far better than it used to be, and that I shouldn’t push for my equal rights and inclusion because the community isn’t ready yet. I hear, “That’s so gay!” all the time, and I hear that AIDS is my punishment for being who I am, like I hear the word, “faggot” all the time. It’s hard not to walk around angry all the time.

Anonymous Massachusetts High School Student

Sometimes I wonder what could possibly be going on in the minds of students at this school who try to hurt others, in the mind of anyone who tries to hurt another. How is it that simply because I'm attracted to women, not men, that it's suddenly O.K. to persecute me? Why should such a small issue be so important to so many people who don't even know me?

Every day when I wake up I tell myself what I already know: that I'm not the only lesbian at this high school, that I'm still as good a person as I was yesterday, that I can still earn respect even though I'm different. Sometimes that doesn't work. The notion of "I'm O.K. You're O.K." just isn't understood by a whole lot of people. In this school, anything that someone doesn't like is "queer," or "gay." Anyone who is different is called a "Dyke" or a "Faggot." After a while, when people constantly bombard you with this mindset that portrays you as inferior, that suddenly they received the "divine inspiration" to judge you without even knowing your name, you begin to believe it. As comfortable as I am with my own sexuality, sometimes I can't help hating myself. But, as much as I have tried in the past, I know that I cannot change who I am. Acting "heterosexual" doesn't make me that, and I don't really want it to.

Fundamentally, I know that the love that I can give is just as valuable as the love that anyone else has to offer, but I'm only a teenager. There's only so much that I can do to change the world by myself. I may only be able to do a small amount, but if we all join together to stop homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, we have the power to educate people, to let them know that their teachers, their parents, and their friends are suffering.

There are so many simple things that you can do to stop someone's pain. Instead of trying to guess who wrote this letter, take the time to feel some compassion for all of the people in this school like me. Remember how it feels to be alienated by something that someone says. Try to at least stop the homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in your vocabulary. Whenever you say that something is "gay," keep in mind that you are probably isolating and deeply hurting one of the people who hears you. When I think of a High School where everyone is free of pain, I don't think of this school. But if everyone just looked out for what they said, and realized that there ARE students here who are being attacked by homophobia, we would be one step closer.

Anonymous Massachusetts High School Student