

Title: Communication “Nuggets” for Dealing with Problematic People

Name: Jon K. Hooper, Ph.D.

Professional title: Consultant / Professor

Organization:

Verbal Victories Communication Consulting / California State University, Chico

Address:

1650 Bidwell Avenue
Chico, CA 95926-9642

Dept. Recreation, Hospitality, and Parks Management
California State University, Chico
Chico, CA 95929-0560

Phone: (530) 342-6045 / (530) 898-5811

Fax: (530) 893-3476 / (530) 898-6557

Email: jonkhooper@hotmail.com / jhooper@csuchico.edu

Abstract (100 word description)

Irritating visitors? Complaining staff members? Interpretive managers are often faced with such “problematic” people. Given that most difficult communication situations are predictable, interpreters should not wait until situations arise to figure out strategies for dealing with them. This paper covers several communication “nuggets” (tools and techniques) that interpreters can put into their communication toolboxes to help deal with problematic people.

Keywords

communication, complaints, conflict, guided tours, interpreters, irate, problematic people, visitors

INTRODUCTION

Irritating visitors? Complaining staff members? Interpreters are often faced with such “problematic” people. This paper will cover several communication “nuggets” (tools and techniques) that interpreters can use to help deal with difficult communication situations.

THE “ESCALATOR APPROACH”

What should you do? While leading a guided tour of your site, two people in your group start talking to one another making it hard for other people to hear your tour information. Should you politely ask them to be quiet? Should you let them know their talking is bothering other visitors?

We can learn how to handle such a situation by remembering how repairmen approach their work. Given that repairmen never know exactly what problems they’ll face at a job site, they carry a variety of tools in their toolboxes. They may have a small, 6-inch-long adjustable wrench for tightening a nut on a ¼-inch-wide bolt yet also have a huge, 24-inch-long adjustable wrench for tightening a nut on a 2-inch-

wide bolt. They wouldn't initially use the 24-inch-long wrench to tighten the ¼-inch-wide bolt's nut because the huge wrench is cumbersome and the leverage it generates might crack the nut or break the bolt. However, if use of the small wrench wasn't generating enough leverage, the repairman would "escalate" to a bigger wrench.

Interpreters should use the same approach when dealing with problematic people by having a lot of tools in their communication tool kits and by initially using the simplest-to-implement and potentially least "damaging" (least confrontational) communication tool. Let's call this the "escalator approach" because you don't step up to get onto an escalator, you simply step forward (almost all escalators have two to three flat steps before the steps start rising). The analogy is that you should try the easiest approach for solving the conflict before "escalating" to a more involved approach. To do this, however, you must first "build" the escalator so you know potential "steps" (communication tools) available to you.

Let's go back to our guided tour. Asking the talkers to be quiet or telling them their chatter is bothering other visitors are strategies "too high on the escalator." There are other strategies that should be tried first that might solve the problem without directly confronting anyone, as follows:

- Pan your head in their direction and talk toward them for a moment
- Keep talking in their direction without panning your head away from them (to keep the focus on them)
- Stop talking for a moment (the resulting silence may let the talkers realize how loud their chatter is)
- Raise your voice volume
- Step closer to them while continuing with your normal tour information

If the techniques above don't stop the talking, there are several ways of confronting the group as a whole without singling out the talkers, as follows:

- Ask the group, "Can everyone hear me OK?"
- Ask people next to the talkers, "Can you hear me OK?"
- Focus the group's attention by saying, "Can I have everyone's attention? I have some special information to share"
- Remind the entire group of your ground rules about disruptive side discussions

Finally, there are a variety of ways of confronting the talkers, as follows:

- Politely ask the talkers (in front of the whole group) if they have a question about a tour topic
- While walking to the next stop, discretely ask the talkers if they have a question about the tour
- While walking to the next stop, discretely let the talkers know that their talking is disrupting others
- While walking to the next stop, discretely tell the talkers that while it's no big deal up until now, if they don't stop talking, they'll be asked to leave (this is the "Speak Up, Set Limits, and Say No" approach by Maria Arapakis, 1990)
- Let the entire group know your BATNA or "Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement" (Fisher and Ury 2011): Tell the entire group that if disruptive side discussions don't stop, the tour will end (the hope here is that other group members will put pressure on the talkers)

The key to using the "escalator approach" is for the interpreter to identify available options prior to a difficult communication encounter.

“ANY OTHER CONCERNS?”

How can you get a visitor to stop repeating (in a slightly different way each time) how upset he is about your limited hours of operation? One solution would be to say, “I heard your concern about our hours of operation. Do you have any other concerns?”

"RIFLING"

What can you do when a visitor “shotguns” you with 3 questions all at once and it’s hard trying to keep all 3 questions in your mind? If you feel comfortable answering any of the questions, say, “I heard you ask 3 questions. Which one would you like to start with?” If you only feel comfortable answering question #2, say, “I heard you ask 3 questions. Let’s start with the second one.”

“COMPLAINTS AND CURES”

What can you do about a situation where your employees come to you, complain, carry on and on, then exit without solving the problem? You could tell them you welcome their complaints but only if they’re accompanied by potential cures.

“I RATE WITH IRATES”

What can you say to get yourself out of a situation where an irate visitor won’t stop belittling you and your agency? One good approach is as follows (Burns 1980):

Step 1. Thank the person for their comments.

Step 2. Acknowledge that points brought up are important.

Step 3. Acknowledge the need for more information concerning the issue.

Step 4. Invite the critic to do something about the issue and provide the person with a "means of action" (e.g., give them the name and phone number of a "higher authority").

CONCLUSION

Given that most difficult communication situations are predictable, interpreters should not wait until situations arise to figure out strategies for dealing with them. And, remember, interpreters shouldn’t use a 24-inch wrench when a 6-inch wrench will do the job.

REFERENCES

Arapakis, Maria. How to Speak Up, Set Limits, and Say No Without Losing Your Job or Your Friends. New York: Warner Books, 1990.

Burns, David. Feeling Good- The New Mood Therapy. New York: Signet, 1980.

Fisher, Roger, and William Ury. Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In. New York: Penguin, 2011.