

# **Damage Control: Dealing with Distractions**

**By Dianna Booher**

The sky's the limit when it comes to physical distractions—planes overhead, fire alarms, messengers bringing in emergency announcements. Some you can control; others you cannot.

Like the time I addressed a gathering of straitlaced financial people of an international banking system. Someone set a can of soda on my materials table when I was not looking. Ten minutes into my presentation, with one sweeping arm gesture, I knocked the can to the floor, splashing everything in its path.

Even the minor distractions, such as a ringing cell phone or groups of people entering and leaving a room next door or a retirement buffet down the hallway, tempt participants to disengage. Do all that you can to select a facility where you have control of such disruptions.

## **Call Attention to the Distraction, Regroup, and Regain Control**

The cause of various out-of-control situations may be a freak incident, as in the following scenario: At a large meeting in a university auditorium, a page needed to deliver a message to the master of ceremonies. She edged through the curtains at the side of the stage and quietly made her way to the emcee, who was seated directly behind the speaker at the lectern. When the page gently touched the emcee on the shoulder, startled, he leaped from his chair with a loud scream. The audience roared, and the speaker at the

lectern stopped abruptly, clueless about why the colleague behind him would spring from his chair with a yelp.

Naturally, after such incidents, you have to let the air clear before trying to regain control of the group. Once the laughter has died down, the noise has stopped, or the problem has been corrected, begin again in one of several ways.

You might recount a personal experience related to what just happened. Or acknowledge the interruption and then begin again. Or simply recap your main points up to the interruption and continue.

## **Try Humor to Recapture Attention**

When a cell phone—yours or someone else’s—rings try one of these lines to recapture attention:

“Uh oh, forgot to tell my parole officer/parrott/grandmother where I was going.”

“If that’s the President, tell him I don’t have time for his questions just now.”

“Tell Mom I’ll be sure to be home by nine.”

## **Call a Break**

Trying to talk through loud noise or a commotion is like trying to cut through a T-bone steak with a toothpick. You simply will not get through the barrier. If you clearly see that the group is no longer with you, either investigate the noise yourself or ask someone else to do so.

## **Talk About Mental Distractions**

Mental distractions can be far worse than physical distractions—things such as a merger or layoff announced an hour before you are to make your presentation.

In such situations, you may be talking, but few people will be listening—unless you go find them mentally and emotionally. That is, they are frozen in place at the point of distraction.

You will need to move to where they are psychologically. Acknowledge their situation by talking about it and giving the group a chance to air feelings and opinions. Then, once they have traded views, opinions, and emotions, they will much more readily “wind down” and give you their attention as an escape from the stress of the current situation.

## **Ignore Helpful Distractions**

If someone explains something to a peer or “catches up” a late arriver and the conversation gives signs of coming to an end, try to ignore the distraction. In fact, the person engaged may be saving the larger group the distraction of a “replay” should the confused person ask you questions personally.

## **Call for More Audience Involvement**

If you suspect that your talkers have lost interest in your presentation, change your game plan and call for more audience involvement. Take an opinion poll on your current point and reflect on the results. A moment for input and open discussion from everyone generally will break up the small pockets of side conversations as they tune in to see what they are missing from their colleagues.

## **Remember that Audiences Will Follow Your Lead**

Whatever the problem—preventable or otherwise—most audiences are forgiving and sympathetic. Goofs remind them that you are human, have weaknesses, get flustered, make mistakes, and experience frustrating circumstances and challenges—all of which make you seem more like them.

If you treat an incident as a major setback, the group may focus on it and become annoyed, to the point of minimizing your ideas and information. On the other hand, if you apologize, downplay the distraction, regain your composure, and correct the problem quickly, they will just as quickly revert to their previously attentive mode.

## **Remove the Dropout Zone**

Having extra empty chairs at the back of the room for latecomers solves the distraction problem for the short term but prolongs it for the long term. Those who arrive late at the beginning or late after breaks can sit there and not traipse down front, distracting everyone in the middle of your presentation. On the other hand, in the long run, others observe that latecomers are accommodated—that these extra chairs remain at the back and allow attendees to arrive late and leave early with minimal (they think) distraction. So as the session drags on, more and more people do just that—arrive late and take a seat in the dropout zone.

Distractions—both those you can and cannot control—will happen. Do everything you can to prevent and minimize their impact. Then relax and take surprises in stride. Who says speaking before a group or leading a learning session isn't adventurous?

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