

Overcoming Obstacles to Success – Overcoming Objections

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*“If you're trying to achieve, there will be road blocks.
But obstacles don't have to stop you.
If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up.
Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it.”
– Michael Jordan*

Overcoming Obstacles

One thing is for certain, there will be obstacles and critics; the question is how you will deal with them. Your response can truly make all the difference. And while you don't have control over others, you can control your response and make a dramatic difference in the outcome.

While there are all sorts of obstacles you'll face, this handout offers advice on overcoming opposition and addressing criticism from board members and others. In many cases you can diffuse criticism and in some cases you can even create a positive outcome.

Another issue you may encounter with your board is a lack of understanding of their role. For that reason we'll also discuss the role of the board and offer some resources to help guide discussions and develop your board members.

*“I am personally convinced that one person can be
a change catalyst, a 'transformer'
in any situation, any organization.
Such an individual is yeast that can leaven an entire loaf.
It requires vision, initiative, patience, respect, persistence,
courage, and faith to be a transforming leader.”*

–Stephen R. Covey (b. 1932)

Responding to Criticism Effectively

When we feel criticized or judged by others, it's normal to go into survival mode and to become defensive. While this instinctive response may be effective in response to a physical threat, it is not the most effective way to respond to criticism in our work or personal lives.

Not responding to criticism can make you look weak and ineffectual. On the other hand, being defensive can make you appear harsh and may give more credibility to the criticism. If you

dismiss the comment without giving it any consideration, you can look poorly in the eyes of observers and could seriously damage the potential for a positive outcome.

Certainly if someone becomes verbally abusive, it is appropriate to set limits, but it's generally best to allow people their say. While they are talking, listen carefully and open mindedly.

Take your time. It's hard to remember in the heat of the moment, but don't rush to respond. Give yourself a bit of time to absorb what is being said and see if there is any of it that you can agree with.

Remember, take the time to listen and understand the criticism. Then decide how you should respond rather than reacting emotionally.

Gather more information. Generally, when we feel verbally attacked some of us tend to attack back, others surrender or withdraw. A more powerful response is to gather more information by asking clarifying questions; try to get to what is behind the opposition. What is the real issue? Asking questions can help you understand.

Asking for more information also allows everyone time to calm down and focus on the issue.

What sort of questions could you ask? Start with clarifying questions about the facts and their perceptions.

- "Why do you feel that way?"
- Could you give an example of the kind of situation you are referring to so that I am clear on it?"
- "Could you refresh my memory about that meeting where you thought I made a commitment?"
- "What did you hear about that situation?"
- "What did you feel I was trying to do at that point?"

You can also ask for their advice. Possible advice questions to ask include:

- "How would you suggest I deal with it?"
- "What would you suggest I do differently next time?"

It can be helpful to reflect back what you are hearing.

Comments like; "I can see that this is very frustrating for you," or "it sounds like you are very disappointed," can help people to feel understood and can help to diffuse tension.

Focus on what is being said. We tend to focus on the feeling of being under attack, which makes it feel even more intense. Rather than focus on your feelings, instead concentrate on listening to the content of the comments. Your first impulse will probably not be as effective as it could be if you take the time to listen and decide how you want to respond.

Listening and empathizing does not necessarily mean that you agree or condone the behavior.

Show empathy. Don't disagree or counter-attack. Instead, show that you have heard the comment. You could say something neutral like; "I understand you have a concern about. . ." If



you blame the individual or accuse them of ill intent, the person is likely to become entrenched in their position. The goal is to create an atmosphere where the individual is able to change the way they feel about it. Ideally, you want to give them a graceful way to back off from their criticism and to find common ground.

Trying to focus on the part of the person you can respect can be helpful. If you can manage it, a compliment is disarming. You can thank them for sharing their concerns or compliment them for their dedication and for taking the time to give you feedback. Your generous comment to the critic can take some of the negative emotion out of their complaint and may enable them to be more generous with you.

The more generous and patient you can be in the face of criticism, the better you and your position look. Act as if the critic means well, whether you fully believe that, or not.

Seek a point of agreement. If there is anything in the critic's statement that you can agree with, admitting that quickly is disarming to the critic and also engenders respect in other witnesses. Also, by agreeing with something, you open the door to explain where you differ without creating undue resistance in the other party.

If you have made a mistake, a sincere apology goes a long way. The ability to say that you are sorry is a sign of self confidence and inner strength. Following it up with an explanation of what you will do differently next time can make it even more powerful.

Take responsibility. Don't put the responsibility onto someone else. If you are the leader, it is especially important that you take responsibility and not blame others. Avoid making excuses, too.

Seek permission to give your viewpoint. If you disagree with all or part of the comments, say "May I tell you my perspective?" This sets the other person up to give you permission to state your view, as you have been willing to listen to theirs.

Other strategies for responding to criticism

What Will Make it Better? Ask them to propose a solution. If the critic continues to attack or complain, acknowledge that you heard them. Then repeat, with slight variations, "What will make it better?"

Re-direct Energy. It is easier to re-direct energy than it is to stop it head on. Moving the discussion from the problem to potential solutions can be an effective approach. If the person will not stop complaining, say "I want to find a way to resolve your concern. When do you want to talk about it?" Keep the tone of your voice calm and even.

Presume Innocence. Even when you have reason to believe someone is lying or has an ulterior motive, it is usually more productive to allow them to save face than to confront them about it. Questions are powerful ways to illuminate the situation. For example, if they are bringing up things that do not seem to make sense you can ask "How does that relate to the.." Keep asking non-threatening questions to draw out more information or to discover inconsistencies.

Demonstrate Goodwill. If you are willing to work toward a compromise and if you remain genial even (especially) if you don't like the person, you will be in a stronger negotiating position.

Listen. Especially at the beginning, listen more and talk less. It is fine to allow pauses in the conversation. Keeping your voice low and your movements calm helps others to feel more comfortable too calmer too. The less emotion you put into it the greater the focus will be on the content of the discussion.

The more successful you are in making the other party feel heard and while also calmly expressing yourself, the greater the chance that you will have a positive result.

Preventing of Criticism Before It Starts

It would be difficult to avoid all criticism or opposition, but there are things you can do to prevent it. The primary one is to gain the confidence of supervisors, co-workers, employees, donors, and the media in advance. How can you do that?

Address specific concerns and complaints. Address issues promptly. Listen carefully to what people are concerned about. Then bolster your case and instill confidence by providing statistics, information from other reliable sources, examples of similar efforts, and positive feedback you may have received.

Explain your plan. Showing that you have a well thought out game plan can give comfort to people and can head off critics.

Get people bought into your major plans and strategies in advance. Provide information on why you think this is the way to go. Encourage questions. If you cannot answer at once make a commitment to get back to them with the answer.

Share successes. Let people know what is working well. Share the progress you are making. Thank and congratulate others for their role in successes. If people feel that they are part of the accomplishments of the organization they will be less likely to criticize it and you.

Be transparent. Provide routine information, including disclosing any problems and explaining how you handled it and what you plan to do to prevent the same issue from happening again.



The Role of the Board of Directors

Some issues can be resolved by cultivating a clear understanding of the role of the board. The well being of the organization depends on the ability of the board and the executive director to work together effectively.

The role of the board. The board oversees the organization at a high level. Specifically, the board is responsible for:

- Establishing the direction of the organization at a high level.
- Overseeing its financial, ethical, and legal well-being.
- Hiring the executive director and providing ongoing oversight of their performance.

If board members also fulfill other roles within the organization (staff or volunteer), they will need to demonstrate:

- Clear understanding that this work is separate and apart from their role as board members.
- Respect for the authority of the appointed executive director and staff with regards to daily operations.

One thing to keep in mind is that the board really only has authority as a body, as a group -- individual board members really have one vote at board meetings – that's it.

The board sets policy. For example, the board would formulate or endorse a high-level euthanasia policy – if the organization is no-kill or not. The executive director is the person charged with implementing that policy.

The executive director oversees day-to-day operations. Board members should not be involved in operational issues such as where water bowls are placed, who is to be hired, or when an individual animal is to be taken in, adopted out, or euthanized.

The executive director is the only staff member who reports to the board. The director oversees the rest of the staff.

How many board members?

- The size of the board of directors must be set down in your bylaws.
- Most states require a minimum of three board members.
- A smaller board is usually easier to work with and often more efficient.

Who should be on the board?

Consider the skills and talents that you need, the personalities, their ability to work well with others, and their commitment to the core values of your organization. Board members should also be able to make a substantial contribution to the organization either financial or in genuinely needed in-kind services.



Steps to finding good board members:

Identify needed skills. Your organization might need donors who can make substantial gifts and provide connections to others who can give, or you may need professional expertise (legal, accounting, public relations, or management experience).

List potential individuals to contact.

Consider these factors for each individual:

- Will they work well with your group? (A single troublesome individual can really slow progress.)
- Do they understand and agree with the organization's purpose and goals? Share its basic principles?
- Will they be able to make a substantial contribution?
- Will they commit to help with fundraising?

Check them out.

- Ask them to complete an application to be on the board and/or submit a resume.
- Plan an in-person interview.
- Check references and talk with others who have worked with them.

Using an application and board agreement can help ensure that expectations are clear.

Prevent problems before they start by getting the right people on the board

Horror stories of troubled boards abound like:

- The overly aggressive individual who scares everyone else off.
- The nice but uninvolved person who can never make it to the meetings or make a contribution.
- The contrary person who disagrees with everything.

The old adage of an ounce of prevention equals a pound of cure comes to mind. To avoid problems:

- Take the time to get to know people before inviting them onto the board.
- Make sure your bylaws allow for removal of a board member and should establish “terms of office” for them, which can provide a nonconfrontational way to end an unproductive relationship.
- Create an advisory board and bring people into the organization this way before inviting them to be board members.

“The world is moving so fast these days that the man who says it can't be done is generally interrupted by someone doing it.”
— Elbert Hubbard

“Most of our obstacles would melt away if, instead of covering before them, we should make up our minds to walk boldly through them.”
— Orison Swett Marden

“Never give up, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn.”
— Harriet Beecher Stowe

Resources:

- Compasspoint Nonprofit Services www.compasspoint.org
- Board Source www.boardsource.org