When giving presentations, there will be some circumstances in which members of the audience do not totally support your train of thought. They may question the conclusions you’ve drawn, feel your data are biased, or feel outright hostile toward you. The key to surviving such instances is to have a system "in your hip pocket" to deal with the situation. An excellent method of dealing with external criticism, which adapts well to hostile audience situations, is outlined by David Burns, M.D., in chapter 6 of his book *Feeling Good--The New Mood Therapy* (New York: Signet, 1981). Dr. Burns proposes a system of "verbal judo" to handle verbal abuse and disapproval in a non-defensive manner. The approach uses three steps:

Step 1: Empathy
Step 2: Disarming the critic
Step 3: Feedback and negotiation

Step 1: Empathy involves putting yourself in the other person's shoes to see the world as they do. Ask the critic in the audience specific questions to clearly define what is meant by his/her question or statement. Even if you know the person is wrong, try to be neutral, non-judgmental, and non-defensive in your questions. Keep delving deeper to really find out what's bugging the person. This not only lets you truly understand the person's concern, but also lets them vent steam. As Dr. Burns notes (p. 124), "[T]his tends to defuse any anger and hostility and introduces a problem-solving orientation in the place of blame casting or debate." An example is given below (p. 124):

Critic: "I think using PowerPoint software is a lousy way of presenting information."

Speaker: "What do you feel is wrong with such presentations?"

Critic: "I simply don't think they're any good."

Speaker: "Why not?"

Critic: "Because the equipment and software required is too complicated!"

Speaker: "Which equipment specifically seems too complicated?"

Critic: "The computer itself seems too complex to fiddle with! What's wrong with writing on a chalkboard?"

Step 2: Disarming the Critic. Dr. Burns makes an excellent analogy between being under verbal attack and having someone shoot at you:

If someone is shooting at you, you have three choices: 1) You can stand and shoot back--this usually leads to warfare and mutual destruction. 2) You can run away and try to dodge the bullets--this often results in humiliation and a loss of self-esteem. Or 3) You can stay put and skillfully disarm your opponent. I have found that this third solution is by far the most satisfying. When you take the wind out of the other person's sails, you end up the winner, and your opponent more often than not will also feel like a winner.

Therefore, disarming involves finding some way to agree with the critic. If the critic is mostly right, this step is easy; you can at least agree in principle. If they're dead wrong, then you must find at least a grain of truth in their viewpoint or, at minimum, agree that it is understandable that they've taken such a stand based on the information available to them. Again, you must avoid being defensive or sarcastic. An example of disarming is given below:
Critic: "The computer is too complex to fiddle with!"
Speaker: "There is no question about it that computers can be intimidating to people who have not used them much in the past, and PowerPoint does require a person to learn an additional type of software."
Critic: "And figuring out how to properly connect all of the cables and monitor and projection system when I'm presenting on the road is just out of my league."
Speaker: "I felt the same way when I first started preparing PowerPoint programs, especially with computer and software compatibility issues."
Critic: "I still don't think audiences gain that much more from a PowerPoint program to make it worth the effort."

The speaker's non-defensive stance tends to take the steam out of the critic and get him/her in a mood to communicate. Dr. Burns calls this "...winning by avoiding battle." (p. 126). If you respond to the critic by defending your position, you simply increase the intensity of the critic's attack.

**Step 3: Feedback and negotiation** is the final step. After empathizing with the person, then disarming them, you finally get to give your point of view. You do so in an assertive, yet tactful, manner, with the aim of negotiating any remaining differences. Dr. Burns suggests the following (p. 128):

You can express your point of view objectively with an acknowledgment you might be wrong. Make the conflict one based on fact rather than personality or pride. Avoid directing destructive labels at your critic. Remember, his/her error does not make him/her stupid, worthless, or inferior.

An example of feedback and negotiation is given below:

Critic: "I still don't think audiences gain that much more from a PowerPoint presentation to make it worth the effort."
Speaker: "I may be wrong, but my experience has shown that audience recall of information is higher in some situations with a well-designed PowerPoint presentation. In fact, I've seen a research paper which supports my belief."
Critic: "The research doesn't apply to my situations."
Speaker: "Perhaps it doesn't apply. There are situations in which a PowerPoint presentation isn't warranted. I have tried all types of audio visual materials to support presentations and feel that for really important presentations, particularly to business clients who are accustomed to quality media, a well-designed PowerPoint presentation is worth the extra effort with respect to audience attention and retention of the message."

You may notice in the above example that an outside source of information (the research paper) was brought into the picture. This usually depersonalizes the discussion and makes it easier for the s to understand the point you are trying to make.

Dr. Burn's approach to dealing with criticism requires patience since you don't get to give your point of view until the end. However, this patience can make the difference between simply stating your viewpoint and having your viewpoint actually accepted by the audience.

Any approach to dealing with people won't work all of the time. Once in a while you'll have a true heckler in the audience who doesn't respond to the three-step approach described above. They are likely to be loud, non-compromising (dogmatic), and domineering. In other words, they're looking for a dogfight. Their extremely critical comments often are either inaccurate or off-the-track (sometimes off-the-wall); that is, they don't relate well to the main topic under discussion. You gain virtually nothing by trying to tackle them, and may lose valuable time which could be spent
answering more pertinent questions. In addition, you're most likely going to lose since you're probably giving the talk on their turf.

If you're too rough on such hecklers and shut them up, other members of the audience may feel afraid of asking subsequent questions. If you act afraid to even deal with the issues, then you may give the appearance that you tend to skirt controversial issues (and lose credibility and trust). The key to survival is to maintain control of the situation; don't let the heckler "grab the reigns." Dr. Burns recommends the following approach (p. 131):

1. Immediately **thank** the person for his/her comments.
2. **Acknowledge** that the points brought up are indeed important.
3. Emphasize that a need exists for more knowledge about the points raised, and then encourage the critic to pursue meaningful research and investigation of the topic. Then invite the heckler to share his or her views with [you, the speaker] after the close of the presentation or session.

This approach shows that you are open to hearing opposing viewpoints and that you don't feel you know everything about the issue. The main advantage is that you let other potential hecklers know that you won't enter into a dogfight in front of the audience, where you are at a disadvantage, since you have the pressure of everyone watching you. Many hecklers are aware of their relatively safe position in the audience; they frequently aren't interested in battling one-on-one afterwards, when the odds are more even. At the other extreme, some hecklers simply want a chance to express their opinions or show off in front of the crowd; once given this opportunity, they may be less of a hassle.

If the heckler insists on continuing the debate, it's time for you to seek help. If you're working in tandem with one of your colleagues, this person may be able to think more clearly and handle the situation better, since they're not under the pressure of standing up front. Your host can also be a big help in such instances. He/she can tell the heckler that input is desired from other audience members as well; the speaker simply isn't in as comfortable a position to do so.

Don't forget one of your best allies, namely your audience. Ask them if they prefer to talk about the heckler's issue or go back to the main theme of your talk. You also can ask them if they would like a chance to provide input on the issue. In either case, the audience usually comes to your rescue. If not, do your best using the techniques described above, then head for home as quickly as possible. After all, there are some "no win" situations in which the odds simply are stacked too high against you. You always can win the next one.
HANDLING HECKLERS:
Key Points to Remember When Speaking Before a Potentially Hostile Group.
© by Jon K. Hooper, Ph.D.
California State University, Chico

HINT 1  Thoroughly understand your audience's stance on the issues BEFORE your presentation.

HINT 2  Work in teams when making presentations.
Your colleague can help field tough-to-answer questions that you're having problems with simply because you're under the pressure of being in front of the audience.

HINT 3  Use you host as an ally.
Determine in advance how the two of you will handle the Q/A period (i.e., how you'll distribute questions evenly among the audience members).

HINT 4  Establish ground rules with your audience during your introduction.
- Indicate whether the audience can ask questions during the presentation or only during the Q/A period.
- Stress that only questions related to your topic will be fielded.
- Indicate that questions will be fielded from the entire audience (i.e., one person will not be allowed to grand stand or "corner the market").

HINT 5  Divide and conquer.
For extremely hostile situations (such as public hearings), break the audience into small work groups and have each one elect a spokesperson. Initially select one aspect/component of the issue at hand to delve into, then ask each group to work on their own to come up with potential solutions to this aspect. Later, when you reconvene the entire audience, only allow the spokesperson from each group to speak. Group pressure will keep the person from presenting personal views that are not representative of the group as a whole. Next, select another aspect/component of the issue to delve into, ask each group to elect a new spokesperson, then put the groups to work. Again, only let the spokesperson speak when you reconvene. Repeat the process as needed.

HINT 6  Stick to your scheduled topic.
Don't let the audience steer you toward other issues, unless you're qualified and prepared to talk about them.

HINT 7  Grab the reins when necessary (don't enter into a dogfight).
When a person dominates the Q/A session or asks off-the-track questions: 1) first thank the person for the comment, 2) acknowledge that the thoughts are important, 3) suggest that more knowledge is needed on the subject and encourage the heckler to pursue research or investigate the topic, and 4) immediately field a question from another person.

HINT 8  Use your audience as an ally.
When a heckler insists on dwelling on an off-the-track subject, ask the audience whether they want to continue this line of thought or if they have questions of their own they'd like answered.

HINT 9  Know when to exit.
When you identify a "no win" situation, courteously leave as soon as possible.
DEALING WITH "PUBLICS":
Suggestions for Improving Relations
© by Jon K. Hooper, Ph.D.
California State University, Chico

HINT 1  Learn as much as you can about your publics (audiences, clients, users, etc.) No single user group is homogeneous.

HINT 2  Accept differing viewpoints as legitimate rather than as "irrational ravings."

HINT 3  Examine the philosophical basis of your management program/business, then broaden it.

HINT 4  Stress common goals between you and your publics rather than philosophical differences (don't get in a shooting match with a skunk).

HINT 5  Offense is more effective than defense; go to them before they come to you.

HINT 6  Identify and work with opinion leaders first, the "masses" second.

HINT 7  Adopt specific communication strategies for each public.

HINT 8  Prepare yourself to deal with sensitive issues. Research the issue AND opposing viewpoints.

HINT 9  Don't let extremists get to you. Aim at the "neutral majority." Remember, laggards/non-adopters represent only a small segment of society.

HINT 10  Fight emotion with emotion...but base it on facts.

HINT 11  View criticism as being aimed at the "professional" you or ideas, not the "personal" you.