

## Presentation - Selling the Plan

### Board Room Magazine January/February 2015

Bob, the club president, was in the early stages of his presentation at the general membership meeting. He was promoting the Board's plan to renovate the Men's and Ladies' locker rooms when several hands shot up. In short order, the members had brought up several issues:

“Back when I was president, we looked into lockers and found that the cost was prohibitive and that the metal frames are still stylish. We spent a great deal of time and effort looking into the new lockers and decided against it. I think we need to really review the options. Why, when I was president we had focus groups to work through all the details. Bill and I even went to several high schools to look at lockers...”

“Why spend money on lockers, we could really use a new entryway? Ours is way out of date. We could also use some new chairs in the dining room, and those planters on the patio, don't get me started. And, you know I had trouble making a reservation the other night.”

“We don't need new lockers. Our old metal frames are holding up just fine. They're just lockers. The club up the road just spent a ton of money on new stuff and now they can't pay down their debt. Did you know that they no longer even charge an initiation fee?”

“Gee, Bob, you know, we've already spent a lot on increased dues and while I have no problems with the decisions you've made, some people question the direction and intent of this Board.”

Many people are terrified at the prospect of public speaking; it's been said that, given a choice, some people would rather perish than speak in public. Because the speaker in this case, Bob the president, is among his peers, the pressure is even greater. Unfortunately for Bob, many members of his audience are not afraid to speak up, and some even relish the limelight, as the above comments show. A room full of your friends can turn ugly when the right—or wrong—person gains speaking privileges and derails the entire program.

According to Harvard professor John Kotter, there are four basic derailers of ideas: death by delay tactics, confusion, fear-mongering, and character assassination. We can see each of these derailers on display in the responses to Bob's proposal. The first speaker, the former president, appears to be against the plan to renovate the lockers, and he uses the delaying tactic—he asks for more information and further consideration of options. Additionally, his speech goes on for several minutes, a tactic that will cause the audience to lose focus and tune out. This inattention

will be a big problem when Bob finally takes control and wants to drive home the reasons in favor of the proposal. The second speaker shotguns multiple ideas into the conversation, which will cause the audience to lose focus and become confused about the exact point of the conversation, forcing Bob to backtrack rather than moving the program forward. Again, this tactic will cause the audience to lose focus. We can see the tactic of fear-mongering at work in the remarks made by the third speaker, who focuses on the topic of debt load. The most dangerous tactic of all is character assassination, as we see in the remarks of the fourth speaker. Although the fourth speaker is being somewhat gentle, the tone and direction of the remarks will cause Bob to experience a natural increase in emotion and self-defensiveness. This response, however, is likely to work against Bob: public argument and rebuttal are not winning strategies when trying to win over an audience on an idea.

Kotter suggests several key strategies for anticipating audience responses when a person has an idea or proposal that is being promoted:

- First, gain people's attention by allowing the attackers in and letting them attack.
- Then, win the minds of the relevant, attentive audience with simple, clear, and common-sense responses
- Win their hearts by, most of all, showing respect to your questioners
- Constantly monitor the people whose hearts and minds you need; the broad audience, not the few attackers
- Prepare ahead of time for the attackers.

Club officials giving presentations or plans should be able to prepare for the difficult issues because the chances are good that they've already heard through the "club vine" what those concerns are. In addition, they most likely know exactly who will be attacking. Taking the time to prepare for attacks may well be the most useful preparation for a general membership presentation.

*MacDonald Niven, CCM, CCE is the general manager at La Rinconada Country Club in California and can be reached at (510) 439-8522 or via email: macniven09@gmail.com*