

EXCEPTIONAL THINKING UNDER PRESSURE

“**W**hat do you do when the 15th person in the last 15 minutes has complained to you that their registration is not right – and you had stayed up all night to make sure everything was correct,” asks Janelle Brittain, MBA, CSP, and speaker at HSMAI’s Affordable Meetings® Mid-America in April 2009. “Do you blurt out your rage? Stutter and stammer because you’re upset? Vow to quit the meeting planning business and take up gardening?” It’s during pressurized moments like these when you need to summon what Brittain terms “exceptional thinking skills.”

Brittain recommends some wonderfully useful strategies for coping with pressurized moments, challenging situations, and the “Mr. or Ms. Snarley” everyone encounters from time to time in meeting planning and every other career as well.

“Try walking in their shoes – think about where are they coming from, what their day has been like, and take a ‘life breath,’” Brittain suggests. When people are tense, they tend to breathe shallowly, not taking in the oxygen necessary for clear thinking.

Here’s how the “life breath” works: breathe in normally, exhale, then exhale a little more. Then don’t breathe in again for as long as you can. Challenge yourself to continue holding for two more counts after you feel that you *must* take a breath. Then when you inhale, your chest will expand and release your tense muscles. Because your body has sensed an emergency, it will send a shot of the needed “clear thinking” chemical to your brain,

plus good oxygenated blood. This will enable you to come up with a creative solution or remember an important point to make.

In a high pressure meeting when you feel your stress levels rising, try drawing straight lines. Carefully draw at least ten parallel horizontal lines, each one an inch long and a half inch below the line above it. Be precise; imagine a teacher is standing over your shoulder. This simple doodle actually stimulates the emotional control and logical thinking center in your brain, and instead of lashing out, you’ll be calm and focused.

Say you’ve had an unpleasant encounter with a client, a boss, or a colleague. Typically you might walk back to your office and can’t wait to pick up the phone and tell a friend, spouse, or coworker about it. Then perhaps you mention it to someone else, and in your carpool on the way home, and then talk about it with your family over dinner. Have you noticed that with each telling, you become more the aggrieved hero and the other party becomes more the irredeemable villain?

That’s human nature. But imagine this scenario instead. Return to your office and sit alone. You can’t change what you said or what the other person said, but how could you have handled it better? Make a list – don’t use phrases like, “I should not have....” Make it positive: “Next time this happens, I will be/say/act....” What did you learn from the incident? Then carry that list with you for two days, looking at it whenever you have a flashback to the incident. Research has shown it takes 31 days of practice to consciously change behavior, but if adrenaline is attached to a memory, behavior can be altered in just two days of practice.

Then yes – pick up the phone, and tell two people your story. Talking it out is psychologically releasing tension, but be sure you try to stick to reality and take ownership for what you may have contributed to the situation going sour. And after you’ve told two people, stop, move on, and focus on your list and a better outcome the next time.

A tactic that almost always works when dealing with an irate person who is complaining to you is simply slowing down their anger. For instance, if you are responsible for room registration at a meeting and a participant is shouting at you, “I never get the right kind of room! Can’t you get it right?!” calmly ask a question that requires the



participant to answer in detail. You might say, “Could you tell me specifically what you ordered for your room, and when you placed your registration?” By answering this type of detailed question, the angry person will be activating the factual part of his or her brain where there are fewer emotions. Plus, you’ll get answers you need to solve the problem without the situation deteriorating further.

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Being tranquil in the face of a crisis requires taking care of yourself too. Get enough sleep. Exercise regularly. Eat right – did you know that bananas are good for the heart and the immune system? Brittain suggests you eat half a banana every morning and half every afternoon. The best lunch on a frantic day is turkey on whole wheat. Turkey gives you a jolt of protein and tryptophan to calm you down, and the carbohydrates in whole wheat are digested slowly, giving you energy all afternoon. Oatmeal is an excellent remedy for not enough sleep – it also gives you a slow release of carbs to give you energy to tap into throughout the morning. Pasta is calming, and so is herbal decaf tea.

Other coping tools Brittain offered include:

- Drinking water, preferably hot water with lemon (it’ll relax your vocal chords too so you’ll *sound* like you’re calm);
- Saying to yourself, “It doesn’t matter here and now” or “I’ll be calm for the sake of _____ [keeping my job, my children, my mortgage, whatever works for you].”
- Practicing forgiveness: “Forgiveness is when you give up all hope for a better past.”
- Dropping the grudge: “Holding a grudge is like taking poison and hoping the other person will fall over dead.” Anger is very unhealthy and destructive to your body over time.
- Singing, humming, or whistling when you see a troublesome person approaching or anticipate an encounter with them. “At the very moment when you want to be obsessing about

how ridiculous or annoying that person is, switch your focus to your favorite upbeat song. What this does is switch the chemicals in your body to more endorphin-like chemicals that bring out positive feelings.

- Laughing.
- Taking mental mini-vacations: imagine yourself in a place you have loved, or would like to visit.
- Playing music.
- Enjoying those things that are not pressuring you today.

“Life,” Brittain says, “is not a destiny, but a journey to be enjoyed.” She closes her presentations with the reminder: “Kaizen!” – which is Japanese for “continuous improvement,” and offers this affirmation in a poem she wrote:

*I choose every day
to improve myself
in one small way.
This turns the struggles of my life
into self-satisfaction
And the frustrations of my day
into self-fulfillment.*

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Janelle Brittain, MBA, CSP is an internationally known speaker, trainer and consultant who has helped tens of thousands in team building, communications, handling change, productivity, customer service and management. She has more than 30 years of business experience. Since 1989 when she founded the Dynamic Performance Institute, she has delivered more than 2000 programs to over 300 clients from Fortune 100 companies such as Chrysler, Bank of America and IBM, to many professional associations, and to hot entrepreneurial companies. Janelle is the author of six published books, including the recently published *How to Say It®* Performance Reviews: Phrases and Strategies for Painless and Productive Performance Reviews and *Star Team Dynamics: 12 Lessons Learned From Experienced Team Builders*, and has produced a training film and a number of CD’s. Business publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Investor’s Business Daily* and *Crain’s Chicago’s Business* frequently seek Janelle’s insight. For more information on Janelle’s programs visit her website at www.DynamicPerformance.com.