



Responding to Emotions and Conflicts in Public Hearings

People who attend public hearings can be passionate, nervous, angry, frustrated, scared, confused, or uncertain about the issues, the hearing itself, or the possible outcomes. Emotions can run high. Conflicts among participants or between participants and officials may result. So what to do?

- 1. Be Real.** People’s feelings are real and conflicts do happen. To pretend or act otherwise will often make people feel angrier and less “heard.”
- 2. Guide Communications.** Clear hearing rules, as well as “good-practice” guidelines for how attendees can effectively make their views or concerns known can help reduce stress and promote good communication and civility.
- 3. Be Attentive.** While not taking sides, the presiding and other officials can acknowledge the verbal and emotional expression of speakers. One aspect of this is good body language that shows respect, diligence and attentiveness. A public official’s clarifying question can also reduce a participant’s fear that no one is really hearing the concerns being expressed.
- 4. Ensure Clarity.** As described elsewhere, recording in some way what hearing attendees are saying, as well as clarifying early how input will be used and how final decisions will be made, will contribute to less stress, confusion and anger. Transparency by public officials almost always helps.
- 5. Acknowledge What You Hear.** If done with skill, it is also possible to feed back (in brief summary) what you have heard a speaker say (“so you’re saying you believe this would kill all the fish in the stream, is that right?”) or acknowledge strong feeling (“this is something that you’ve cared a lot about for a long time isn’t it?”). This can be done while staying in an appropriate role and without being seen as taking sides. Practice helps of course, and equal treatment for all is important. Time is always a factor that may limit such interactions at a specific hearing.
- 6. Identify Values and Interests.** Look for and ask about values and interests that underly speakers’ expressed positions. People can more often understand each other’s values and interests before they accept different positions. Here’s an example:

- *“I think children are vitally important to our community” (value);*
- *“I want the health of our children protected” (interest);*
- *“I want a legislated limit on the amount of mercury in our water supply” (position)*

There are usually more ways to satisfy interests than to bridge conflicting positions. This kind of conversation can reduce or more clearly focus conflicts and differences.

- 7. Dealing With Conflict.** Interpersonal conflicts that result from the issue in controversy cannot be addressed directly in the hearing. However, these are dynamics that linger, affect the quality of individual and community life, and may reignite in the future. Local officials may wish to encourage that unresolved interpersonal conflicts be addressed through a local mediation program or similar resource, especially when they are tied to an agency's decision.

Conflicts between the public and officials at public hearings are a more complex matter. However, clear process, good listening, and acknowledging the input received will help reduce the likelihood of bad feelings and ongoing conflict. Where appropriate, more and earlier public dialogue (before the public hearings) will also help. Decisions that reference interests (see above) and values will also tend to enhance understanding and reduce unnecessary conflict.

This excerpt is from the Institute for Local Government publication, [Getting the Most Out of Public Hearings: Ideas to Improve Public Involvement](#). For this and other ILG publications, visit www.ca-ilg.org/PublicEngagement.