

Adapting to Audience Attitude

You are more likely to be able to persuade when you direct your goal and your information to your audience's attitude.

- **Attitude** - a general or enduring positive or negative feeling about some person, object, or issue.
- **Opinion** - verbal expression of a belief or attitude.

Because the success of a speech depends on determining how an audience is likely to react to your goal, you must find out where the audience stands. You make such judgments based on demographic information and opinion polls.

The more data you have about your audience and the more experience you have analyzing audiences, the better your chances are of judging audience attitudes accurately.

Because it would be impossible to direct your speech to all the various shades of attitudes held by the members of your audience, you must classify audience attitudes as predominantly "in favor," "no opinion," or "opposed" so you can develop a strategy that adapts to that attitude.

- **In Favor:** If you believe your listeners are already in favor of your belief, then you may want to change the goal to focus on a specific course of action.
 - **Example:** If members of your audience already favor limiting their intake of saturated fats, it would be a mistake to focus on changing their belief.
 - When you believe your listeners are on your side, try to crystallize their attitudes, recommit them to a particular direction, or suggest a specific course of action that will serve as a rallying point.
- **No Opinion:** If you believe your listeners have no opinion, then you will focus on goals that establish a belief or goals that move the audience to action.
- **Neutral:** If you believe your audience has no opinion because they are neutral, then you see your audience as being able to reason objectively and accept sound reasoning. In this case, your strategy will involve presenting the best possible arguments and supporting them with the best information you can find.
- **Apathetic:** If you believe your audience members have no opinion because they are apathetic, all of your effort may be directed to moving them out of their apathy. You will need less material that proves the logic of your arguments and more material that is directed to your listener's personal needs.

- **Opposed:** If you believe your listeners are opposed, then your strategy will depend upon whether their attitude is slightly negative or totally hostile.
 - **Example:** If you believe your listeners are slightly opposed to your proposal, you can approach them rather directly with your arguments, hoping that their weight will swing them to your side.
 - Another part of your strategy should concern the presentation of arguments in ways that lessen your listeners' negative attitudes without arousing their hostility. With a negative audience, take care to be objective with your material and make your case clearly enough that those members who are only mildly negative will consider the proposal and those who are very negative will at least understand your position.
 - **Example:** If you believe your audience is hostile towards your goal, you may want to approach the topic indirectly or to consider a less ambitious goal. If you present a modest proposal that seeks a slight

change in attitude, you may be able to get an audience to at least consider the value of your message.

If you believe your goal is important to them regardless of their negative attitude, then develop a strategy that will be more subtle. This will involve recognizing their hostility and talking about the topic in a way that will not arouse that hostility.