

The Nightmare Respondent: Dominant, Hostile and Intoxicated

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This story may sound unlikely but every word is true.

I was doing a focus group for a malt liquor client. Malt liquor is a low-quality, inexpensive, malt-based alcoholic beverage that is popular among downscale, inner-city young men who drink it primarily for the cheap buzz it provides.

The respondents filed in. Collectively, they looked sullen, suspicious and uncomfortable in the conference-room setting. One guy in particular looked really out of it; he had an aggressive demeanor and his eyes were pink and glassy. I could not believe he got through the facility check-in procedure without attracting the staff’s attention. Nevertheless, I had interviewed men like this before and was not initially troubled. In situations like this, my opening remarks are especially important. The four-minute introduction is specifically tailored to make the participants comfortable with their surroundings, to be honest with them about the topic and what we were going to do, to assure them that their opinions were important, and to put them at ease with the two-way mirror. I try to bond with them around the job at hand, while simultaneously establishing my position as the group’s leader. I finished my speech and everything seemed fine so I started going around the room with respondent introductions. When I got to Cletis, all hell started to break loose.

He would not say his name (although it was on the name card), and insisted that everyone call him “X.” Then, in a threatening voice, he loudly demanded to know who was behind the mirror. I answered him patiently but he just got angrier. An uneasy mood settled over the room. When the discussion finally started, he frequently interrupted and made scathing, disparaging comments about what the other participants were saying. When I asked him a direct question, he either rambled incoherently or told me that the question was too stupid to answer. Within a few minutes, the rest of the respondents, as tough as they were, were reluctant to say anything. The situation was getting out of control and I had to do something. I dispensed with the usual, “you have a phone call” routine to get rid of him. Instead, I told him point blank that we could no longer do our job with him in the room, and that he would be paid but would have to leave immediately. Things then took a turn for the worse. Mr. X angrily informed me that he was not leaving and that neither I nor anyone else was going to kick him out. To

emphasize his point, he pulled his shirt aside to show us a pistol protruding from the waist of his pants.

The room went into shock. Nobody moved. At that moment, there was a timid knock on the door, which eased open just enough to allow a note to flutter in and land on the floor. The note read: "Bob, can you come outside for a second?" I put it in my pocket, walked back to my seat, then sat down and calmly said to the group, "Maybe it's my hair style (I am bald), but this is the third group I've done this week where somebody's pulled a gun on me." The entire room of players and street hustlers, including Mr. X, broke into hearty laughter. The tension was broken. I then seized the moment and asked the respondents how we could resolve the situation. One man spoke up and said that everyone in the room was basically a good person and it was a shame we couldn't sit for two hours and take care of business without somebody messing things up. The others, now emboldened, nodded in agreement as another respondent spoke to X, "Why are you doing this? Bob's been straight with you and you've made us all look bad. Why don't you either sit down and shut up or leave?" In response, X quietly apologized to the group. He also asked if he could stay and help get the job done. I stepped in and told him that he could stay only on condition that he not interrupt the conversation, that he give me a brief but truthful answer if I should call on him, and that if he was uncooperative again he would have to leave. He promised the group that he would behave; we resumed the discussion, and finished the session without further incident. My terrified clients were not only happy to be alive, but were amazed that the group was salvaged and all of the topics covered.

These are the lessons I would draw from this experience:

1. Make sure the facility staff alerts you about a potentially troublesome respondent before the group begins so that this type of problem can be avoided.
2. Be very honest with your participants right from the start. Tell them what you are going to do and what you expect from them. Establish an environment of mutual respect and commitment to do what was expected. This will serve you well if a problem occurs later.
3. When you encounter a troublesome respondent, don't panic. Maintain your sense of leadership and authority. Stay calm and give the respondent every opportunity to back down and resume normal behavior. Also, try to refrain from leaving the room in the midst of a conflict.
4. If the respondent continues to cause trouble, it is often possible to enlist the help of the other participants to find a way to salvage the session. There is a natural tendency in group behavior to want to resolve an uncomfortable situation. Use it.
5. Stay focused. Don't take anything personally. Make everyone aware that all you want to do is get the job done and suggest that everyone needs to come together to make that happen.

In a situation like this one, it probably helps if you were raised in a big city, as I was, and/or are not easily intimidated by erratic or rude behavior. Nevertheless, while this was an obviously bizarre series of events, I believe that the above guidelines would be effective in managing most incidents of problem behavior in focus groups.