


# Responding to Questions and Verbal Attacks (the CLARA Method)



(Note: Most of us tend to start with Step Four, especially if the question or comment is hostile or threatening.)

## STEP ONE: CALM AND CENTER

Many of us—when we feel threatened, attacked, or “put on the spot”—**need to internally calm and center ourselves before we can honestly be engaged in listening.**

## STEP TWO: LISTEN

In a debate, when you’re listening to your opponent, you listen until they get their facts completely wrong and you can use the real facts to make a fool of them. Instead, in CLARA, **listen until you hear the moral principle that they’re speaking from or a feeling or experience that you share.** Listen until you find a way in which you can open your heart and connect with them.

**Try to understand what lies at the core of the questions:** the fear, the uncertainty, the anger, the frustration, the truth offered by the person talking to you. What might their voice inflection or emotional state tell you? What assumptions might their question demonstrate? If you know the person, this may help you answer these questions, but it’s still important to listen carefully.

What do they really want to know? What is legitimate? If you believe that they don’t really want to know anything, but are just attacking you, consider what part of their

question might be considered reasonable by others in the audience (or within earshot, if you’re not formally speaking to a group).

**It’s also important to listen to what the person is actually saying.** In trying to understand what might be behind the question or comment, we don’t want to miss what the person literally said.

## STEP THREE: AFFIRM

This is the step we don’t usually think about in a conscious way. **Express the connection that you found what you listened, whether it’s a feeling, an experience, or a principle that you have in common with the other person.** Affirm whatever you can find in their question or statement(s) that represents a reasonable issue or a real fear. If you can’t find anything (and we’ll help you get better at finding something), there are other ways to affirm. The exact words don’t matter – **the important part is to convey the message that you’re not going to attack or hurt the other person and that you know that they have as much integrity as you do.**

To actually be affirming, this step must be genuine, rather than “sweet” or “slick” talking. It’s also generally best to speak spontaneously from the heart rather than to develop “pat” answers. Share of yourself.

Affirming is not a natural process for many of us, but it gets easier with practice.



# Responding to Questions and Verbal Attacks (the CLARA Method) *...continued*

## STEP FOUR: RESPOND

We often start here. Wait. Listen. Affirm.

Debaters, politicians, and sometimes the rest of us often avoid answering the question that was asked and answer a different question in order to stay in control of the situation, not lose the debate, etc. Instead, in CLARA, **answer the question. Respond to the issue the person raised. If you agree with them, say that too**, even if it feels like you're giving up some ground. By doing this, you're conveying the message that you're not afraid of the other person and that their questions and concerns deserve to be taken seriously. If you don't know the answer, say so. Refer them to other sources if you have some or tell them you'll find out the answer if that seems appropriate.

Sometimes it seems that the person does not really want information but is simply trying to fluster you or attack you. Reacting with respect rather than defensiveness or anger is important; it shows respect when a question or statement of this nature is addressed rather than "blown off."

Personal insights and experiences often reach people in a way that abstract facts do not.

## STEP FIVE: ADD INFORMATION

Step five gives you a chance to share **additional information that you want to give the person**. It may help the other person or the audience to consider the issue in a new light or redirect the discussion in a more positive direction. This is a good time to state whatever facts are relevant to the questions the person asked. This may involve correcting any

mistaken facts they mentioned; you can do this now because now that you've made a heart connection, the other person is probably more open to hearing your facts than they would have been if you had started there.

Some other possibilities include offering resources (such as books, organizations, or specific people) or adding a personal anecdote.

There is simply no one recipe for success as a peace team. "One cup interpositioning mixed in with equal amounts of CLARA and a pinch of modeling" is simply not the way it works. We each bring our gifts and limits to the field and what works for one person may not work as well for someone else. Flexibility and creativity are the keys!

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