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Conference Syndrome

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THE RUNDOWN OF lectures, workshops, master classes, and performances scheduled for the upcoming NATS National Conference features a wide variety of topics. The sheer number of sessions alone—which is now typical for the conference—means there are endless opportunities to learn new skills, pick up current ideas, and network with some of the great minds in our field.

Having attended several national and regional NATS conferences, I have observed a prevalent condition that can keep participants from reaping the maximum benefit from all the available offerings. While “master class syndrome,” a phrase coined by Lynn Holding,¹ can occur at these events, we should also be on the lookout for “conference syndrome.” My working definition of conference syndrome is “a buildup of preconceived notions that impede learning.” It seems not to matter whether the preconceptions are positive or negative, as both can prevent attendees from absorbing and retaining beneficial information presented at conferences. Known to be contagious, the syndrome is, thankfully, not chronic; the proverbial ounce of prevention, through awareness of its symptoms, allows conference-goers to avoid succumbing to its ill effects.

An article in *Psychology Today* by author and psychologist Karyn Hall, Ph.D., explores the ways our perceptions often distort reality and lead us to inaccurate suppositions.² For instance, “confirmation bias” causes us to look only for evidence that supports the ideas we already have and block evidence that presents alternative viewpoints. This is widespread in our approach to news media, as many consumers gravitate toward outlets that provide content to match their current worldview, while remaining skeptical toward those that present contrary perspectives.

Confirmation bias can cause NATS members to outright reject information they hear in a conference session if it does not align with their own experiences. This can lead participants solely to attend sessions they believe will corroborate their current practices and to avoid those sessions that may contain conflicting information—a common symptom of conference syndrome.

Hall also describes our tendency to classify people and experiences into categories. While these categories allow us to make quick associations, they may not always be accurate. For example, we may assume that a conference presenter who teaches a certain branded methodology will preach only its commandments and not bring anything original to the lecture. Similarly, assuming that everyone who studied with a specific teacher or attended a cer-

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tain conservatory will demonstrate the same pedagogic tendencies can be equally inaccurate. Certainly, understanding a presenter's background can lend important context to his/her work and help highlight trends, but broadly assuming an outcome based on that background denies the professional input and creativity individual presenters bring to their work.

Hall also says, "If you imagine an event occurring, your view of the likelihood of that event actually occurring increases."³ In other words, if we are convinced we are going to see something, we are likely to see it. This happens despite the fact that, according to Hall, we often don't see what is happening right in front of our eyes.

Applying this to conference syndrome, if we have heard through the rumor mill that a certain teacher encourages unhealthy vocal choices, we may be hyper-vigilant in finding evidence of this assertion when attending a master class with that teacher. This single-minded objective may cause us to observe what we believe to be unhealthy practices. In reality, we may view the same practices as perfectly acceptable if we come across them in a different setting or from a different teacher. Hall seems to suggest that when we assume we know what we are going to hear in a presentation, our minds listen only for those things that confirm our ideas, keeping us from the rest of the message.

In the same vein, a negative impression of a presenter may be unfairly influenced by our mood at the time. Hall points out that when we are in a negative mood, we tend to expect more negative outcomes and we see ourselves and others more negatively. Coming into a conference session with a crick in your neck from the hotel pillow, or being upset about something that happened back home, or just being "hangry" (bad-tempered due to hunger) before lunchtime can negatively influence the impressions we take from a session.

This may be especially important because, as the 1980s shampoo commercial states, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." According to Hall, a first perception can actually impact all of our later perceptions. Referred to as "the anchor effect," we anchor into a way of thinking based on that first impression, subconsciously informing our future feelings on the person or subject.

As an example, I have attended conference sessions on topics that seemed incomprehensible at the time only to

find subsequent lectures given by the same presenters to be much more digestible. Perhaps this was because I had a better background on the subject at the later lecture, or maybe the presenter was better able to explain the information in ways that I found more understandable. Regardless, my initial impression, based on the assumption that it would mirror the experience I had at the first, could have kept me from even attending the second lecture.

A final example of conference syndrome is the presumption that all the important points of a session will be mentally retained without writing them down. "Aha moments" feel significant when they happen, but even the best ideas can get lost in the shuffle over the course of multiple days and numerous sessions. Hall warns of the tendency to reconstruct memories, causing situations that occur after an event to influence how accurately we remember the original event. This is all the more reason to keep a laptop handy for taking notes during conference sessions, not to mention good old-fashioned pen and paper, in case of a dead battery.

To avoid the symptoms of conference syndrome, I recommend Hall's suggestion to decide beforehand that you simply are not the kind of person who makes assumptions based on preconceived notions. She says that when individuals decide they are not the kind of people who, for instance, eat sweets or smoke cigarettes, they are better able to avoid those behaviors. Therefore, it may help to remind ourselves before each session to hear the presentation with fresh ears. While we will inevitably hear some information that confirms our own practices and some that conflicts with our current ideas, we will allow every concept that is presented to be heard for what it is and evaluated fairly.

I attended my first NATS National Conference as a SNATS member. At that time, being much more in student mode than in teacher mode, I was prepared to soak up as much of the experience as I could. The conference did not disappoint. Returning to subsequent conferences more firmly rooted in teacher mode than student mode, I have caught myself attending some sessions with a "prove it to me" attitude that I am disappointed to admit. While a healthy skepticism is wise and can keep us from being taken in by something we know to be misleading or that oversimplifies a complex subject, we must also be aware of all the symptoms of conference syndrome

that may cause us to unfairly prejudge, thereby closing us off to opportunities to grow. As Hall says, “Keeping in mind that your perceptions may be faulty or incomplete may help you be more flexible in your views, giving you more peace and contentment.”⁴

I hope to see you all in Las Vegas. And remember: What happens in Vegas . . . should be brought back to our studios and implemented in ways that benefit the students in our care.

NOTES

1. Lynn Holding, “Master Class Syndrome,” *Journal of Singing* 67, no. 1 (September/October 2010): 73–78.
2. Karyn Hall, “A Few of the Many Ways We Distort Reality,” *Psychology Today*, August 20, 2012; <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/pieces-mind/201208/few-the-many-ways-we-distort-reality> (accessed December 22, 2017).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.



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