



Amy Showalter October 26th, 2011

Occupy Wall Street: Do They Have the Underdog Edge?

The Occupy Wall Street protesters are the latest high-profile example of how underdogs don't use their positions as effectively as they could.

I give the protesters credit for getting off their computers and on the streets. Research we conducted with hundreds of grassroots professionals found that getting their volunteers into the trenches was their No. 1 challenge.

I also give them points for understanding that being the underdog can be an advantage in the business and political arenas, especially during an economic decline. That's what my research found. I interviewed more than 1,000 grassroots advocates and the senators, members of Congress, state legislators and business leaders whose minds they changed for my new book, *The Underdog Edge: How Ordinary People Change the Minds of the Powerful...and Live to Tell About It*. Based on those interviews and survey responses, we have uncovered the seven key extreme influence tactics required to persuade those up the food chain. Upward influence matters because it's about the results, not just noise.

We usually support the underdog, but my research found that not all underdogs are created equal. If you want the advantage of the underdog mantle, you can't have a huge amount of resources, so the protestors made a mistake when they allowed the members of more than three dozen unions to march with them. Successful underdogs have few resources and don't squander their resources. Few in America view unions as resource-starved underdogs, so the sympathy factor is negated.

My most surprising finding was that being passionate for your cause actually makes you less persuasive with those up the food chain. Powerful people told me that overtly passionate advocates doomed their own missions because their passion made them seem unpredictable and, difficult to work with. Nice matters more than noise.

The most effective advocates have grit developed from experiencing adversity and loss and are willing to spend years working on their causes. Consequently, the most effective grassroots coalitions include members who have lived a little and suffered some hardship and understand what it means to persevere. Translation: get the seasoned citizens on your team.

Finally, underdogs who use the "gift of heroics" to influence powerful people are more likely to succeed. No fewer than half the powerful people interviewed told me they changed their mind about an issue once they realized agreeing to the request meant they would be one of the "good guys."

2/10/2016

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