



K Street Café

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From Tension to Trust: How to Build Trusting Relationships with New Legislators, New Advocates and New Colleagues. Part 2

In **Part One** of our post on building trust, we wrote about the need for building trust with those whose philosophy doesn't align with yours, and how the power of disconfirmation can accelerate that trust.

We'll conclude in this post with the counter-intuitive, yet effective techniques of arguing against your self-interest, and the persuasive grip of suffering.

Say It Before They Do

The argument against self-interest is a fast-track trust-building tactic. Be honest---virtually every position has some drawbacks. Think about commonly encountered car sales techniques: the seller omits those drawbacks, or introduces them late, after the sale has already been made. (Maybe that's one reason that trust surveys show car salespeople consistently being rated toward the bottom of the trustworthiness scale.)

Reversing this prototypically "salesy" approach, the argument against self-interest tactic *leads* with some arguments that are negative for the communicator. These negatives should be chosen because they are either (1) likely to come up anyway or (2) relatively mild drawbacks. Use mild drawbacks to your case if the audience is unlikely to know much about the topic.

If on the other hand, the audience is hostile and informed, then you may as well lead with the objections you are certain the audience is likely to make. You'll have to address those objections anyway; you're better off taking them on yourself than waiting for your adversary to clobber you with them.

Beat Yourself Up Before the Other Side Does

According to my colleague Dr. Kelton Rhoads, "In general, people who beat themselves up get off easier than those who let a hostile adversary do it. For example, I recently asked a representative from a large tobacco company to address my campaigns class at USC. As you might expect, my class was wary of the presenter, but their hostility evaporated when he said, 'The difficult position we're in, in the tobacco industry—we really have brought it on ourselves.' The class wasn't expecting this argument against self-interest, and they mentioned afterward that it had a strong and immediate disarming effect. That's exactly what the research literature on persuasion would predict.

The argument against self-interest is also known, in legal circles, as “stealing thunder.” That’s where the defense, for example, stands up and says, ‘Your honor, I know that Johnny has been in this court three times before for drug possession, but this time, I can prove to you he was set up.’ Then when the prosecutor jumps up and yells, ‘Your Honor! This is the fourth time that Johnny’s been in this court for the same charge!’ the jury yawns, because that’s old news. Stealing thunder has been shown in laboratory and field experiments to significantly increase trust for the attorney that uses it.

What are the weaknesses to your position (be honest, we all have them)? How will you address them? How will you teach your grassroots influencers to talk about them to legislators and opinion leaders?

Suffering

Another strategy that’s frequently not considered is, interestingly, suffering. People assign increased trustworthiness to those who are willing to suffer for their positions. Think about it—many of society’s heroes are people who have suffered greatly for their cause.

Dr. Rhoads was explaining this principle to a political activist, who stopped him mid-explanation and exclaimed: “That explains why I have so much more success when I canvass for my cause when it’s over 90 degrees outside!”

He observed, “She was exactly correct—people attributed more trustworthiness and more credibility to her when she was willing to suffer in the heat. After a moment’s reflection she added, ‘You know what; our best canvasser is someone who’s in a wheelchair. I’d never thought of what that said to our audience, but it said, ‘This is how much I believe in our cause, and I’ll gladly suffer for it.’ Clearly, it wouldn’t be wise to manufacture evidence of suffering, but if you truly are suffering for your cause, don’t hide it! Overplaying the card isn’t recommended, but not showing the card at all would be a big mistake.”

As I wrote in *The Underdog Edge*, www.underdogedge.com a 2009 Harris Poll asked Americans to name their heroes and why they were considered heroes. Among the reasons mentioned most often were:

“Doing what’s right regardless of personal consequences”
“Not giving up until the goal is accomplished”
“Overcoming adversity”

Heroes suffer, and everyone wants to help a hero.

Who in your organization has the “arrows in the back” from their belief system? How can you legitimately engage them in your cause?

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