

How to win an argument (by arguing against yourself)

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A great way to disarm a political opponent is to disarm yourself before they can. Now, hear me out. I'm not arguing for pacifism. I'm arguing for a strategy that Dr. Kelton Rhoads, my colleague and a professor at USC's Annenberg School of Communication, recently witnessed in one of his public policy classes:

“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.

Finding ways to disarm the other side is a significant step to increasing what we've referred to in previous columns as your [Trust Quotient or TQ](#). We believe that this disarmament tactic is essential for building trust with hostile audiences so it's perfect for the new Washington:

Ask yourself. . . . 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.

Rhoads explained 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."

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.

Ask yourself. . . . Who in your organization has the “arrows in the back” from their belief system?

How can you legitimately engage them in your cause?

By displaying some humanity—through your willingness to acknowledge your own weaknesses and your willingness to put them on display—you’ll strengthen your hand, break through the opposition and, at a time when Washington is more polarized than ever, perhaps be seen as someone both sides can trust.