



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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### **The Art of Persuasion | OAS Episode 51**

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

This is Legislative Staff Week, which is being celebrated in state Houses across the country, and we have as our guest Curt Stedron, who is a legislative trainer with the National Conference of State Legislatures. Curt, welcome to the program.

Curt: Thanks for having me.

Gene: Curt, you have a presentation I know that you share with state legislators and state legislative staff called “The Art of Persuasion,” and I know you’ve given it several times. With this being Legislative Staff Week, tell me why it’s an important topic for those that work for legislatures.

Curt: Well, members of the legislative staff have to work with a number of different constituencies: legislators, leaders, their colleagues, the media, their government agency staff and the general public. They’re constantly managing up and managing down and managing sideways. And so I think there’s a regular need for them to be able to inform others in an efficient way, to educate them on various topics, and then ultimately to lead to some persuasion, to move a person’s point of view from one end of the spectrum perhaps a little bit further along that spectrum, maybe not to the other end, but certainly nudge them toward a different perspective or point of view.

Gene: OK. So let’s get into the details. Legislatures are part of a world where issues, policies and people are often divided and it’s hard for someone on the left to figure out the views of a person on the right and vice versa. And then there are those in the middle and they believe they understand the truth about a given topic. So talk to us about how we create these truths.

Curt: Well, that’s been a very evolving point of view in the neuroscience community, in the philosophy community, and I think just in the general town square. Essentially ... I’ll talk about it in several steps. The first is as we make decisions about what we’re going to believe, what we’re going to accept as an opinion or what you might call a truth, those tend to be the things that inform our decisions. And yet we can’t make a decision unless we have some sort of criteria of choice.

And so one of the things I talk about in my talk is how we do develop criteria that then become fulcrums or trigger points for our choices. But the criteria aren't just made up; they just don't come from nowhere. They tend to be tied to something that's generally pretty powerful with us, and these are our core values. So there's this little domino effect. We have these core values and then they shape criteria that we then go ahead and make our choices and take our actions based on.

But the really interesting thing is the move one more domino back. What is the thing that ties any one of us, you or me or any person listening right now, to a particular set of core values? They don't come out of the womb naturally predisposed to have these core values. Some of that is life experience; some of that is a little bit of biology. But the biggest new development in decision-making theory and persuasion theory is kind of which hemisphere the brain is driving our truth formation and then decisions that we take based on those truths.

So for centuries it's always been thought of, you know, since the Enlightenment, since the Age of Reason, there's been this idea that our left brain, our analytical, our logical brain center is the thing that drives the choices and beliefs and opinions that we have. Economists for years thought of mankind as being rational actors who act in predictable ways that can be aggregated and we can make decisions about how people are going to function in the world.

But there has been tons of research in the last quarter century from a number of different sources that suggest that we kind of have that a little bit backwards, that we've depended too much on this idea that humans think themselves to a decision or an opinion, when in fact the research seems to be pretty clear that we feel our way to decisions and then logic kind of comes in in a separate or secondary role.

So the work of people like Daniel Kahneman or his colleague Tversky, neuroscientists like Kenneth Dodge at Duke University, they tell you a lot of things that suggest that the emotional center guides our decision-making decisions. So Duke says that all information processing is emotional and Joseph Ladue and other neuroscientists tell us that brain states are a fundamental result of an emotion. So we're seeing this idea that emotion is the thing that triggers the decision-making process. Logic sort of comes in after the fact.

The last thing I'll say on that is that the brain kind of knows its rational center is limited. We have problems of induction where you and I are, you know, we have different life experiences and so we base our premises of all of our arguments off our different points of view, and then at the end we end up with these wildly divergent conclusions that can't be reconciled.

Well, the brain kind of knows that logic has these limitations and it sort of outsources this decision-making over to the right center of the brain, the emotional, intuitive, some people call it their gut, and that is the place in which truly these decisions are being made. Neuroscientists call it system one, and so that makes the choice—it's the person we fall in love with; it's the car we want on the lot; it's the movie that we really respond to. And then system two, the logical processing, comes in after the fact and sort of straightens things up, covers up our tracks, provides the window dressing, the justification for what we already intuitively knew to be true.

So that's sort of the new paradigm of how brains make decisions, form opinion and perspectives, and then carry out actions based on those.

Gene: So then how does one go about developing the art of persuasion? Are there tactics people can use to help move forward their decisions and actions?

Curt: Absolutely. So first of all, you have to kind of keep that premise of what we just talked about in mind. If you're really targeting your messages at the wrong hemisphere of the brain and you're not getting the results you want, well there's reason for that because that hemisphere of the brain is not really making those decisions.

This is why when we debate on Facebook or at our Thanksgivings coming up, at the Thanksgiving table, and we throw out all these rational arguments and they have all these facts and figures attached to them and we find that we're not really persuading the person because that part of their brain isn't really what's responding. It's this other part that we have to target. So I'm going to talk about two, sort of two and a half different tactics that work really well for that.

The first is the idea of storytelling. Storytelling is an ancient human activity. Humans are essentially hardwired to want to hear a good story. They sort of see their own experience through the stories of other people; they share that kind of connective bond when they hear a story that relates to them in some way.

A gentleman of the name of Nick Morgan from the Harvard Business Review, he tells us that in an information-saturated age, which is clearly what we're living in now, you won't be heard unless you're telling stories. Facts and figures and all the rational things that we think are important don't stick in our minds at all. He goes on to say that stories create sticky memories by attaching emotions to the things that happen in our lives.

So there's this notion that stories tap into that right brain chemistry of provoking an emotional response, or feeling response, and when we can tell a story and use an anecdote to illustrate a larger, more abstract or rational concept, we have a much stronger impact on the audience that soaks in that message.

The last thing I'll say about stories comes from not science, not from Harvard, but from an ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, who tells us that the argument made by a man's life is of far more weight than an argument made by a man's words. So you can say things rationally, but it's never going to have the same impact emotionally as actual life stories. That's the first thing I talk about.

The second thing that I would mention is this really interesting concept called "value reframing." So here's the mistake that most people make when they try to persuade other people of things. So I have my core values and you, Gene, you have your core values. The problem that I or most people experience when they try to persuade another person is you make an appeal based on your own powerful emotionally held core values.

So Gene, you should do what I want you to do because it will fulfill something that I care about deeply. And that really doesn't work for you because that's not what you care about deeply. So what value reframing suggests is that we flip that, and what I try to do is demonstrate through

my argumentation that if you do what I want you to do, or you think what I want you to think, your emotionally held core values will come to fruition; not mine, but yours.

So let me give you kind of an example of that from sort of a hot-button issue around the world, the idea of letting in foreign refugees to a country. In general, there have been a lot of studies that suggest that liberals respond to values like care, equality and fairness, while conservatives respond to values like security and loyalty.

So the mistake that liberals make when they say, hey, we should let refugees into the country, is that they appeal to their own value that they care about, which is the value of caring—we need to care for these people. The problem is that's not a value that conservatives respond to. And liberals have a much better chance of persuading a conservative if they can appeal to a value that conservatives care about, security or loyalty. The problem is conservatives do it the opposite: They say we shouldn't let those people in because we care about our security. But that's not a value that works for liberals.

So the mistake of not using value reframing is to try to persuade another person by appealing to your value. It's much stronger if you can appeal to one that they care about.

I can give you one more example in the time that we have: environmental regulation. Generally, liberals make the mistake of trying to say we need to regulate the environment because we need to care for the environment, but that doesn't really respond strongly with conservatives. They have much better luck when they argue that there's an impurity, when they talk about garbage in the forest or things that are impure in the ocean. That value of purity really does resonate with conservatives and they get a much better response when they craft their message in that way.

On the other end of the aisle, when you talk about increased military spending, generally conservatives will say we need to spend more on our military because of our increased security, but that's a value that they care about. They're much better off talking in terms of like helping wounded veterans or VA care, those sorts of caring values that liberals respond to.

So the real key of value reframing is to find a way to explain that the thing you want another person to believe or do will actually fulfill their own deeply, emotionally held core values and not your own. That's the big tactic.

Gene: Well, and I assume that finding those points to get someone to understand your side of an issue, that word choice is probably pretty important here. As someone who has done his share of speeches and press releases in this time, I know word choice can be critically important. Does that play into these decisions?

Curt: Your storytelling is not going to work particularly well and your elegant value reframing is not going to work very well if you haven't really taken much care in thinking about the actual language that you use. There are really two essential roles of language: one is denotation—we tell what a thing is, a pen, a table, a chair; and connotation—which is the way a word makes us feel.

And so I think persuaders need to really pay attention to the connotation of their language. I mean, this is why we have things like euphemisms in society. We used to call people a janitor and then they started to call them a sanitation engineer, and that just sounded and felt better; it had more prestige attached. Personal assistant is now executive assistant. And so we change the way language feels to people.

I graduated from West Point a long, long, long time ago. I had a professor who used to say: The army never retreats, because retreat just felt bad; it sounded negative. He said: We make strategic advances to the rear.

So finding the right connotation with language and the right word choice that makes a person feel a particular way is going to enhance our ability to tell an effective story or our ability to reframe a topic in a way that appeals to their emotional core values.

Gene: You can see how this is critically important in the state legislative arena where your word choice and your appeal to people are very important.

Curt: Absolutely. I mean, what I just said cuts both ways, right? If you use emotionally appealing word choice and language, you draw people to you and, of course, conversely if you use the wrong word choice that has a negative emotional influence on other people, their doors tend to slam shut in your face.

If you use improper, imprecise, negatively connotative language, people tend to immediately ... remember what I said about the brain—that right brain kicks in, we have a distaste, displeasure, poor emotional experience, and then the rational part of the brain kicks in with all the justifications of why I shouldn't listen to this person anymore, why they're not a good source on the issue, why they don't care about my interest, and the rational brain just sort of takes it from there.

So the way we use words is they're going to turn someone, open them up to a message that we want to get across, or shut them completely down and make that penetration essentially impossible.

Gene: Well, Curt, I think your word choices have been very good here. We've covered a lot of ground on persuasion. What haven't we touched on that's really important?

Curt: I guess the last thing I would say that sort of relates a little bit to what we were talking about in terms of connotation, but tone matters. I like to end my presentation when I do it live with this thing called the "golden argument." So imagine if the gods on high came down and offered you this scroll, that if you unfurled it and read the words on the scroll, you'd be able to persuade anyone of anything. And of course you say: How many people want that scroll? And everyone wants the scroll.

And you say: Well, what if the gods said that there's just a two-word preface that you have to use in front of that? And, you know, sure, I'll take that deal; I can go persuade people. You run up to the first person, you unfurl the scroll, then you remember you have to say the two-word preface and the two-word preface is: hey, dumbass.

And at that point your tone that you have struck is so profoundly negative, is so emotionally unpopular with that person, that it does not matter what tactic or technique you might employ after that. If you don't pay close attention to your tone, you immediately will lose people.

So it's not just connotation, it's not just what we say; it's how we say it because we are essentially tilling a soil so that we can plant a seed, and there is a right way to till the soil that the seed will take, and there is a wrong way to till the soil. And all of that ties back to the emotional rapport that we're establishing with our word choice, with our tactics, and with our tone.

So if you take nothing else out of this 20 minutes, take that away, because there is nothing you can do worse to ruin your chances with persuasion than to create a dark or impure sort of emotional connection between you and the audience. And the flip side of that is absolutely true: when you can choose the right words with the right tone and the right tactics, you're much more likely to get a positive emotional response and then a response of persuasion.

Gene: So Curt, if state legislative staff, state legislators or others want to learn more about this, or want you to come present on this topic, and I should point out to our listeners that your presentation typically is an hour long, so we definitely had to shorten your research and your work on this subject, where would you direct people?

Curt: I'd direct them right here to our office. Stacey Householder oversees all leader services and legislative training. So an inquiry to Stacey or an inquiry to Curt Stedron here, also in the same department, or Angela Andrews who is also heavily involved with staff training—any of the three of us, we can certainly take your desires and customize a program that would fit whatever needs you may have. We know that some of this stuff needs to be tailored to a particular state, a particular set of circumstances, and we're happy to do that.

Gene: We've been talking with Curt Stedron who is the legislative trainer for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Curt, thank you so much for your expertise today.

Curt: My pleasure.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of "Our American States." We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Google Play. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.