

Effective Persuasive Conversations

WHAT:

How to hold effective persuasive conversations. These are not casual chit-chat conversations. It is much more structured and formalized.

WHY:

Persuasion conversations move people from an undecided or unsupportive position to a position of support.

WHEN:

Most conversations of disagreement aren't opportunities for a persuasive argument. This type of conversation is not like a typical conversation you would have with a friend or colleague. For you to be successful in persuading the other party, the conversation needs to be

highly structured. It is up to you to set these parameters and in doing so, set yourself up to win the argument. Also, note that conversation, by definition, requires on-going back and forth between the parties. A conversation takes some time. Social media exchanges - and most TV interviews - aren't "conversations" as we are using the term. They are sound bites, declarations, talking points, speeches, etc, but they aren't conversations. Of those various communications, it is in conversation that you are most likely to build the trust that underlies persuasion.

NOTE: Persuasion rarely works in a vacuum. Think about a decision to start a new diet or join a gym. It's a gradual process with dozens of small individual nudges along the way. Evolved thinking on political issues is often the same. Your conversation may be the very first nudge for the person to change their thinking, or it may be the last one they needed to pull the trigger. Your job is to move them closer to the final destination.

FIRST: Decide that YOU want to have a conversation with this person, and determine a specific objective you want to achieve. The more incremental, discreet, and specific your objective, the more likely you are to achieve it. You are welcome to just banter with the person, offer some counterarguments to their points, and go on your way. But that isn't likely to be a persuasive conversation.

Once you decide to engage in a conversation and determine the specific result you are looking for, you immediately attempt to control the conversation. You do so by simply inviting the other person to explicitly agree to a conversation. This interrupts the disagreement, establishes areas of agreement and respect, and allows you to set the parameters of the conversation including:

- Subject matter
- Definitions
- Speaking sequence and time
- Personal respect



STEP 1: AGREE THAT YOU ARE DEBATING

Scenario: Disagreeing with Uncle Eddie at Thanksgiving about urban crime.

At Thanksgiving, Uncle Eddie is watching FOX News nonstop and after several provocative segments says, "Crime is out of control, it's not safe to walk down the streets, and instead of putting criminals behind bars, the woke liberal elites who run these hellhole cities are trying to ban guns so regular people won't even be able to defend themselves! Bo, you're a big city liberal, how do you live in that kind of upside down bizarro world?"

This is not a playing field in which to have a productive conversation or persuade Uncle Eddie to change his perspective. With these sort of "tirade" statements that throw in everything but the kitchen sink into the argument, you want to break it into pieces.

"Woah Eddie, that's a lot and it sounds like you're pretty fired up about it. Do you actually want to talk about some of this or are you just frustrated and blowing off steam?"

Scenario: Meeting with a disagreeable legislator

You're trying to pass an RCV bill and have bipartisan support, but the Chairman of the elections committee is adamantly opposed. He agrees to a meeting with you and other supporters, but starts off the meeting by saying, "Look, you can talk yourself blue in the face, but I think RCV is a bad way to run elections. It's antidemocratic, too hard to understand, confuses voters, has ballot exhaustion problems and ends up electing people who don't have the most support. Our current system works fine, so why change to something that will make it worse?"



Again, this is a perfect opportunity for you to be the "grown up" after the other person has just ranted and taken control of the conversation. Again, ask them to agree to a conversation...

"Thank you sir for taking some time to meet with us. I understand that you disagree with us about the value of RCV, but listening to you just now, I hear some of the same concerns I had when I first learned about RCV. Would you be willing to talk with us about it for a few minutes?"

STEP 2: SET THE PARAMETERS

If the other party agrees to have a conversation with you, you are halfway to persuading them. The next step is to set parameters of the conversation that will ensure your success. Think of it as verbal gerrymandering. You draw the outlines of the conversation so that it ends up where you want it. For example, you may say to the committee chairman,

"I want to be respectful of your time. To help make sure we don't get off track, could we put some guidelines in place? Can we say, for example, that we will focus this conversation specifically on what RCV would look like if used in municipal elections here. And I'd like to define RCV exactly how it is defined in the legislation. If it's ok with you, I'd like to spend a few minutes understanding your position, a few minutes outlining our position, and then a few minutes answering your questions. I promise to respect you and your position and ask you to do the same in return? Is all of that fair?"

STEP 3: HOLD THE CONVERSATION

At this point, you have virtually guaranteed yourself a persuasive win. How? You have narrowed and defined the conversation in such a way that your position is clearly advantaged. Listen very carefully while the other person speaks. Use techniques from the “Conversations Across Difference” and seek to find places of agreement. When the person says something that falls outside the agreed bounds (or that may be a weakness in your position) gently, but firmly remind the person of the ground rules of the conversation “Look, we could spend hours talking about how RCV was used in Alaska or why Florida banned it, or the way it was implemented in New York City, but since we have limited time, we agreed to focus on how it would be used in OUR state’s municipal elections.”

STEP 4: ASK FOR FEEDBACK

When the allotted time for the conversation has expired, ask the other party for feedback. This is your opportunity to see how much you moved the ball towards your hoped for result. It also lets you find which arguments were persuasive with the person and which weren't. If you didn't get the other person to agree with you here, this is your opportunity to create a roadmap of how you CAN persuade them next.

“Did any of what I had to say resonate with you? As you know, we would very much like for you to hold a hearing on the bill. Even if you aren't fully supportive, we feel like it's a fair measure and at least deserves a hearing. Can we count on you to do that? Who else would be helpful to hear from to help you come to a decision on a hearing? I get the sense that part of the opposition is based on politics, not just whether RCV is a good policy. How can we alleviate some of those political concerns as well?”

