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# Lessons From Obama's Victory And Romney's Loss That You Can Apply To Your Cause



US President Barack Obama appears on the television show 'The View.'

A political campaign is a lot like your life — it's a series of connected moves intended to get others to buy-in to your ideas and to *you*. There are several learning moments you can take from the presidential campaigns and apply the next time you need buy-in for your concept, product or cause.

## 1. Build from Your Strengths

So many organizations (and individuals) feel they need to grow from shoring up their weaknesses. While that is a viable strategy, more time should be spent on exploiting your strengths. The late great Peter Drucker said this (when [Tiger Woods](#) was at the top of his golfing game by the way) about using one's strengths:

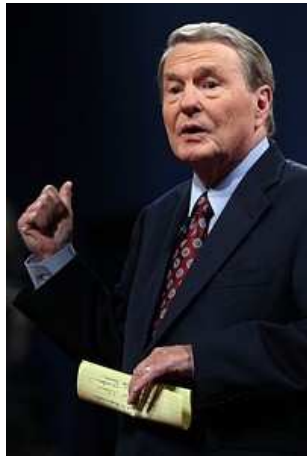
*"The great mystery isn't that people do things badly but that they occasionally do a few things well. The only thing that is universal is*

*incompetence. Strength is always specific. Nobody ever comments, for example, that Tiger Woods isn't a very good football player."*

President and Michele Obama's appearances on pop culture TV was an example of playing to their strengths. Poll after poll showed them with a likability edge over Governor Romney. They were doing what they do best – being accessible and engaging their likability. Most people who watch those shows were probably Obama voters, anyway, so why take the time to appeal to them? They were working to their strengths.

***The Bottom Line:*** What are your strengths? Are you making productive use of them, or focusing on your weaknesses?

## **2. Understand the Power of Contrast and How You Compare**



*Debate moderator Jim Lehrer speaks prior to the Presidential Debate at the University of Denver on October 3, 2012 in Denver, Colorado.*

Romney lost the election, but he was far behind Obama prior to the debates. Without his debate performance, I don't think the election would have been close. The [Denver](#) debate changed how Obama was perceived because there was a direct contrast with Governor Romney. Without the media filter, he was viewed differently. This illustrates the power of contrast.

I have heard it said that "There are no orphans in decision-making." The Denver debate was a seminal point in the campaign because of the influence principle of contrast. A fundamental doctrine in human perception is that we judge the difference between products, ideas, and in this situation two people, based on the order in which they are presented. Prior to the debate,

non-political junkies, many of whom are independent voters, knew of Governor Romney via the negative TV ads or perhaps brief video footage of his speeches. We know that negative information has five times the emotional weight of positive information. Voters say they hate negative ads, but they work.

When they had a chance to Romney with President Obama, side by side, the distinctions became more prominent. While people knew of their philosophical differences, when they were presented to the public together in a debate format, the differences in style and substance became vivid. Romney contrasted favorably with President Obama by appearing presidential, enthusiastic, and in command of the facts, and Obama seemed uninterested in the proceedings.

***The Bottom Line:*** As the executive coach [Marshall Goldsmith](#) said, “Just because you are on third base doesn’t mean you’ve hit a triple.” Fair or unfair, you are always being compared to someone or something. The order in which your ideas (and you) are presented affects your impact.

[Americans Celebrate President Barack Obama's Victory](#)

### 3. Self-Control

I wrote about it in my last post and I’ll emphasize it again because we see so often see it as the final arbiter of political candidate success. For reference, see Edwards, John; Spitzer, Elliott; and even Clinton, Bill. As Mark Halperin and John Heilemann accounted in their book [Game Change](#), many of Obama’s early supporters among the legislative elite were motivated to support Obama due to their concerns about [Bill Clinton](#)’s behavior and how that would impact Hillary’s chances to win the general election. Self-control is a campaign virtue!

Romney’s “47%” comment and Obama’s “You didn’t build that” notwithstanding, both campaigns did a good job of being disciplined in their message and exercising self-control in their reactions and remarks. Although Obama was lambasted for his enervated performance in the first debate, it was more disciplined than the behavior of the gaff-tastic Joe Biden.

We saw a lack of self-control torpedo two U.S. Senate candidates, Indiana's Richard Mourdock and Missouri's Todd Aiken. Instead of offering a crisp answer to how they felt about abortion rights, they went on to philosophize and say more than just answer the question. Both were leading in the polls before their comments, and both plummeted in popularity and lost the election afterward. It was a classic example of a lack of self-control, which had serious consequences for them personally. Self-control is the ability to leave some things *unsaid*.

Don't believe self-control is important? The study of self-control is being increasingly studied by social psychologists, as they have found it to be as important to achievement as intelligence and grit. Roy Baumeister, Dianne Tice and Todd Heatherton's book [Losing Control](#), stimulated more experiments on self-control and they found that it predicts a college student's grade point average more than their IQ or SAT score.

***The Bottom Line:*** You do not have an unlimited supply of willpower. You need to know what circumstances break your willpower supply, and avoid those situations, or replenish your willpower when you know you'll need to draw upon your reserve.

#### **4. Similarity Matters**

While it should not matter, it does —the degree of similarity shared between you and who you are trying to win over is a persuasion predictor. What makes similarity persuasive is about more than what you look like and your background. The literature shows its essence is shared values and attitudes. While Obama and Romney are exotic in their own ways, many in the electorate felt that Obama was more “like them” and relatable.

***The Bottom Line:*** While it is a rather primitive form of decision-making, the similarity between you and your audience is a subtle yet powerful influence factor. How are you genuinely similar to your prospect?

#### **5. Context Matters**

Would Obama have been elected in 2008 without a war-weary nation? Would Romney with his business acumen have been the GOP nominee without a struggling economy? Would Obama have won the election without pictures of him

and Chris Christie comforting Hurricane Sandy storm victims? We are a visual and emotive public, and people believe what they see more than what they read.

Whether you know it or not, your behavior is based on your situation more than almost any other factor. Required reading on this topic comes from Sam Sommers excellent book, [Situations Matter: Understanding How Context Transforms Your World](#). The wise influence agent is always aware of the environment and plans his or her next move based on that context.

***The Bottom Line:*** Are you aware of the dynamics in your situation? How should you alter your message and approach based on the context? Conversely, are you making poor decisions based on the situation vs. the facts?

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