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# The Final Three Persuasion Lessons from the Final Presidential Debate: Obama's Zingers vs. Romney's Restraint

In my last post, I shared some persuasion lessons from the first Presidential and Vice Presidential debates. Because each debate reveals new persuasion tactics and lessons, I couldn't resist writing a sequel to my [October 18 post](#).



US President Barack Obama (L) listens to the Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney during the second presidential debate, the only held in a townhall format, at the David Mack Center at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York, October 16, 2012, moderated by CNN's Candy Crowley. (Image credit: AFP/Getty Images via @daylife)

**1. Latch on to Your Likability.** We saw some new (for President Obama) communications tactics in the last debate on foreign policy. There were the zippy zingers: [“The 1980’s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back”](#) was one. Now, I’m all for political humor, but that is an old line.

When Romney voiced concern over a shrinking Navy, Obama replied that a large Navy is not needed, and [does so with some sarcasm](#): “You

mention the Navy, for example, and that we have fewer ships than we did in 1916. Well Governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets. We have these things called aircraft carriers and planes land on them. We have these ships that go underwater, called nuclear submarines. It's not a game of battleship where we're counting ships."

As I wrote in my last post, the goal of these debates ostensibly, in a close race, is to move wavering voters to your side. And do it in a way that causes little confusion. As I recall, the appeal of Obama in 2008 and why many have faith in him today was his brand of hope, positivity, and desire to repudiate the "partisan politics as usual" theme so many were tired of. He was uplifting.

President Obama has always outranked Governor Romney on the [likability scale](#). In this third debate we saw something, and someone, different. His use of sarcasm was inconsistent with his proclamation in his inaugural address : "On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises. . . .in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things."

As any social psychologist will tell you, people generally don't like to think really hard about major issues (their findings, I'm just the messenger). So what happens when you behave inconsistently, so differently from your brand? You confuse people, you make them think harder, they don't like to think, and you lose them.

***The Bottom Line:*** If you are viewed as warm and likable, don't mess with it. Sarcasm is inconsistent with warmth, and it confuses those you are trying to persuade.

**2. Willpower Matters.** Willpower is all about the long term, the end game. It's the opposite of what you feel like doing. I have little doubt that Romney felt that some of Obama's comments did not pass the eye-roll test, and he wanted to let his "freak flag fly" in response, but he refrained.

The study of willpower is now popular among social scientists because of its connection to life success. They believe that self-control is a muscle that can indeed be developed with practice. Let's

face it, by his own admission, Romney has not consumed alcohol for 65 years, so his willpower muscle is pretty strong!

As the reigning authority on this topic, Roy Baumeister, author of [Willpower: Rediscovering Our Greatest Strength](#), says: “Willpower is what separates us from the animals. It’s the capacity to restrain our impulses, resist temptation – do what’s right and good for us in the long run, not what we want to do right now. It’s central, in fact, to civilization.”

Mitt Romney participated in *over 20 debates* during the GOP primary contest. That’s a ton of practice in high-stress, high-pressure situations where he likely had to exercise some restraint in how he responded to accusations, attacks, etc.

***The Bottom Line:*** Willpower is a persuasion virtue. Can you imagine the reaction if Romney employed the Joe Biden “feel good now” technique of eye-rolling and guffaws? He would be accused of disrespecting the President, being arrogant, and would have affirmed the stereotype of a greedy, private sector profiteer typified by the negative ads. His self-control served him well.

**3. Don’t Choose Tactics Based on Your Style** Why would President Obama, who always is rated more likable than Governor Romney, and had an aspirational tone in 2008, use sarcasm to make his points? Either his advisors wanted blood, or he thought Romney would take the bait and lose his composure. Why would he think Romney might lose it? Because he (Obama) is known for being sensitive to criticism. And a classic persuasion mistake is to assume that because we would react in a certain way to praise or criticism, others will react that way, also.

In a 2006 memo to Obama, advisor David Axelrod wrote the following regarding Obama’s ability to handle criticism:

“This is more than an inconvenience,” David Axelrod wrote in a memo to Obama on November 28, 2006, in raising concerns about Obama’s thin skin. “It goes to your willingness and ability to put up with something you have never experienced on a sustained basis: criticism. At the risk of triggering the very reaction that concerns me, I don’t know if you are Muhammad

Ali or Floyd Patterson when it comes to taking a punch. You care far too much what is written and said about you. ... When the largely irrelevant Alan Keyes attacked you, you flinched.”

Dr. Kelton Rhoads of USC and Director, [Working Psychology](#), offers this observation: “In preparation for the final debate, it looks like Obama went to his strength as the community organizer. Modern community organizing was invented by Obama’s intellectual mentor, Saul Alinsky, [who wrote thirteen rules for radical agitation](#). They’re essentially ways of efficiently tearing down existing power structures. Rule #5 states: ‘Ridicule is man’s most potent weapon. It is almost impossible to counterattack ridicule. Also it infuriates the opposition, who then react to your advantage.’

“Ridicule has been a political weapon in great favor over the past decade, brought to a high-water mark in the political comedy routines of Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, and others. Biden used it as his primary weapon in the Vice Presidential debate, essentially dismissing his opponent Congressman Paul Ryan with mockery and belittling laughter.

“Obama’s third debate was characterized by zingers, designed to draw Romney out. The put-downs sounded like sit-com laugh lines to my ear. Romney, however, failed to rise to the bait, as predicted by Alinsky. Romney was decidedly un-infuriated, and didn’t overreact as he was supposed to.”

***The Bottom Line:*** Just because you would react a certain way to a tactic does not mean others will react in the same fashion. It is a pervasive persuasion mistake to think that your audience or opponent is similar to you. So when you consider a particular technique or response, check yourself to make sure you are not using it because it is how *you* would react.

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