

WIN BIGLY: PERSUASION IN A WORLD WHERE FACTS DON'T MATTER

By Scott Adams

INTRODUCTION (WHERE I PRIME YOU FOR THE BEST)

WHY I COULD SEE (AND SAY) WHAT OTHER PUNDITS COULD NOT

For example, where others saw Trump pushing outrageously impractical and even immoral policies, I saw him using standard negotiating tactics and hyperbole to make it easier to find the middle ground later. And he did.

PART 1: WHY FACTS ARE OVERRATED THE MOST IMPORTANT PERCEPTUAL SHIFT IN HISTORY

Cognitive Dissonance

- This is a mental condition in which people rationalize why their actions are inconsistent with their thoughts and beliefs. For example, if you think you are smart, but you notice yourself doing something that is clearly dumb, you might spontaneously hallucinate that there was actually a good reason for it. Or perhaps you believe you are an honest person, but you observe yourself doing something dishonest. Your brain will instantly generate a delusion to rationalize the discrepancy. This is a common phenomenon in all normal humans, but we generally believe it applies only to *other* people.

Confirmation Bias

- This is the human tendency to see all evidence as supporting your beliefs, even if the evidence is nothing more than coincidence. This is another common phenomenon that we believe happens only to other people.

You should never take financial advice from cartoonists, but let me tell you one thing that feels safe to share: If the CEO of a publicly traded company is routinely described as having a “reality distortion field” — as was the case of Steve Jobs—keep an eye on that company. That's a sign of a Master Persuader.

ABOUT FACTS

PERSUASION TIP 2

Humans are hardwired to reciprocate favors. If you want someone's cooperation in the future, do something for that person today.

PERSUASION TIP 3

Persuasion is effective even when the subject recognizes the technique. Everyone knows that stores list prices at \$9.99 because \$10.00 sounds like too much. It still works.

1. Make a claim that is *directionally* accurate but has a big exaggeration or factual error in it.
2. Wait for people to notice the exaggeration or error and spend endless hours talking about how wrong it is.
3. When you dedicate focus and energy to an idea, you remember it. And the things that have the most mental impact on you will irrationally seem as though they are high in priority, even if they are not. That's persuasion.

If I had boringly predicted that Trump would win the election, without any odds attached to it, the public would have easily shrugged it off as another minor celebrity's irrelevant opinion. But if I make you pause to argue with me in your mind about the accuracy of the 98 percent estimate, it deepens my persuasion on the main point—that Trump has a surprisingly high likelihood of winning.

The prediction was designed to attract attention, and it did. It was also designed to pair my name with Nate Silver's name to raise my profile by association.

Using a little bit of wrongness (my precise 98 percent prediction), I managed to attract more attention than I would have otherwise. And that conferred on me some credibility by association. As long as I was literally in the same sentence with Nate Silver, I would gain some credibility by proximity alone.

And when they were done criticizing Trump for the “error” of saying he would build one big solid “wall,” the critics had convinced themselves that border security was a higher priority than they had thought coming into the conversation. The ideas that you think about the most are the ones that automatically and *irrationally* rise in your mental list of priorities.

Master Persuaders move your *energy* to the topics that help them, independent of facts and reason.

Some mistakes are just ordinary mistakes. But when you see a consistent stream of “mistakes” from a Master Persuader, be open to the possibility that some of those mistakes are about controlling your focus and energy.

FACTS ARE WEAKER THAN FICTION

For more science on the topic of how intentional “mistakes” can aid in memory retention, I recommend the book *Impossible to Ignore*, by Dr. Carmen Simon. The gist of it is that you need to surprise the brain or make it work a little extra to form memories. Our brains automatically delete our routine memories fairly quickly. Most of us don't know what we were doing on this day a year ago. But we easily remember things that violate our expectations.

Persuasion Vocabulary

Anchor

For example, a big opening demand in a negotiation will form a mental anchor that will bias negotiations toward that high offer.

The High-Ground Maneuver

The High-Ground Maneuver is a persuasion method that involves elevating a debate from the details on which people disagree to a higher concept on which everyone agrees.

Linguistic Kill Shot

A linguistic kill shot is a nickname or short set of words so persuasive that it can end an argument or create a specific outcome.

Setting the Table

Setting the table refers to managing an opponent's first impressions before negotiations begin.

Thinking Past the Sale

Thinking past the sale a persuasion technique in which a subject is prompted to imagine what happens after a decision has been made, to bias the person toward making the decision.

PART 2: HOW TO SEE REALITY IN A MORE USEFUL WAY

HOW STRONG IS PERSUASION?

Want to see something freaky?

Set this book aside and do an Internet search for "the McGurk effect." Click on the first video you see. It is short. And it will blow your mind when you see how powerful persuasion can be.

Near the start of the clip, you see a close-up of a man's mouth while he repeats, "Bah, bah, bah, bah, bah." You recognize his lips as forming the *B* in "bah," and it all makes sense.

Then things get weird.

The soundtrack stays the same, but the man moves his lips as if he is forming the sound "fa, fa, fa" instead of "bah, bah, bah." And while you watch, as if by magic, your brain turns the sound "bah" into "fa." You know this is an illusion, and you know how they are doing it. And yet it still works. You can go back and forth between the lips that seem to be saying "fa" and the ones that seem to be saying "bah." In reality, the sound is "bah" all the way from start to finish, but your brain will instantly translate the "bah" into "fa" when the lips on the video are moving as if they are creating an *F* sound.

This is a great example of how visual persuasion is more powerful than auditory persuasion. Our visual sense *changes what we are hearing in real time*, even when we know the illusion.

MASS DELUSIONS

TULIP MANIA

Do you remember when citizen Trump once tweeted that climate change was a hoax for the benefit of China? It sounded crazy to most of the world. Then we learned that the

centerpiece of politics around climate change—the Paris climate accord—was hugely expensive for the United States and almost entirely useless for lowering temperatures. (Experts agree on both points now.) The accord was a good deal for China, in the sense that it would impede its biggest business rival, the United States, while costing China nothing for years. You could say Trump was wrong to call climate change a hoax. But in the context of Trump’s normal hyperbole, it wasn’t as wrong as the public’s mass delusion believed it to be at the time.

WHEN REALITY BIFURCATED

People are more influenced by the *direction* of things than the current state. So Trump changed the direction.

Trump couldn’t fully erase the Hitler illusion until he had another “movie” to replace it in people’s heads. Trump created the replacement movie (in part) by using a common business persuasion strategy that I call the new-CEO move. Here’s how I described it in my blog after President-elect Trump and VP-elect Pence claimed credit for keeping Ford and Carrier jobs in this country.

Posted December 1, 2016

So what does a Master Persuader do when he needs to create a good first impression to last for years? He looks around for any opportunity that is visible, memorable, newsworthy, true to his brand, and easy to change.

Enter Ford.

Enter Carrier.

Trump and Pence recognized these openings and took them. Political writers will interpret this situation as routine credit grabbing and exaggerate claims. But business writers will recognize Trump’s strategy as what I will call the new-CEO move. Smart CEO’s try to create visible victories within days of taking the job, to set the tone. It’s all about the psychology.

What I taught you in the past year: Facts don’t matter. What matters is how you feel. And when you watch Trump and Pence fight and scratch to keep their jobs in this country, it changes how you will feel about them for their entire term. This is a big win for Trump/Pence disguised as a small win.

The political press will dismiss Ford and Carrier with fact-checking. But the stock market will be smarter. Experienced businesspeople recognize the new-CEO move and they know how powerful and important it is.

THE MAKING OF HYPNOTIST

The reality one learns while practicing hypnosis is that we make our decisions first—for irrational reasons—and we rationalize them later as having something to do with facts and reason.

PERSUASION TIP 9

Display confidence (either real or faked) to improve your persuasiveness. You have to believe yourself, or at least appear as if you do, in order to get anyone else to believe.

One of the things we learned in class is that hypnotizing friends and family doesn't work well because you have too much history and baggage to overcome. People close to you will have trouble getting into the mind-set that you suddenly have a magical new skill. Strangers are more likely to grant you the assumption of credibility, even if you are only a student of hypnosis. And you need the credibility for the hypnosis to work.

The reason hypnosis is not a powerful tool for losing weight or quitting smoking is almost humorously simple: You *don't want* to eat less and you *don't want* to stop smoking. Smokers and overeaters like both of those things. That's the whole problem. If people didn't enjoy eating and smoking, they wouldn't be doing those things. And hypnosis is only good for getting you what you *do want*. If any part of your mind doesn't fully embrace the change you want, hypnosis might be the wrong tool.

But hypnosis can work well in situations where the subject has no objection to modifying an old behavior. For example, let's say you want to overcome a specific type of fear. In those cases, the subject has zero desire to keep the fear. The fear provides no pleasure or other benefit.

But sometimes you are working toward a change that has no precondition to overcome, and that's the best situation. For example, if you were already a well-adjusted person and you wanted to learn how to relax more effectively, hypnosis would be a great tool. In this case, there is no objection to relaxing—the person just doesn't have the tools to do it well. Hypnosis can provide the right tools.

You'll be happy to know that hypnosis can't make people do things they know to be wrong in their waking state. Or at least there are no credible stories of that happening. That makes sense to anyone who has ever been hypnotized. A hypnotized person is actually conscious and aware but deeply relaxed. They can open their eyes and walk out the door at any time.

By now you are wondering if stage hypnosis is real or just a trick. Stage hypnotists seem to make people do embarrassing things in public, and that would appear to violate what I just said about people not doing things while under hypnosis that they would object to if awake. In the case of stage hypnosis, there is a magic trick involved on top of the hypnosis. The magic trick is that you assume that people onstage think the way you think. If you would be embarrassed doing what you see them doing, you assume they feel the same. But they don't. In any crowd of a hundred people it is easy to find several who are good subjects for hypnosis and also not easily embarrassed by public displays of silliness. The illusion for the audience is that subjects on stage are so deeply under the hypnotist's spell that they're acting against their own self-interest by embarrassing themselves in public. The secret to the illusion is that only people who will go onstage in that situation are the ones who know they won't be bothered by the experience.

I used the hypnosis technique in the paragraph before last that starts with "By now you are wondering ...". The hypnosis technique involves demonstrating that I know what you are thinking at the moment you are thinking it. If I guess right, this creates a little bond between the author and the reader because it feels like I know you as well as I might know a friend. It's like

I'm in your head. That type of personal connection makes whatever I write seem more interesting to you because you naturally care more about a friend than a stranger.

PERSUASION TIP 11

Guess what people are thinking—at the very moment they think it—and call it out. If you are right, the subject bonds to you for being like-minded.

For more tips on writing, I include in appendix B my brief viral blog post on how to be a better writer.

HYPNOSIS SUPERPOWERS

For example, if you are familiar with my *Dilbert* comic strip, you might know that Dilbert has no last name. His boss has no name at all. You don't know the name of Dilbert's company or what industry it is in. You also don't know its location. All of that omission is intentional. It is a trick I learned from my hypnosis class. I leave out any details that would cause readers to feel they are different from the characters in the comic.

PERSUASION TIP 12

If you want the audience to embrace your content, leave out any detail that is both unimportant and would give people a reason to think, *That's not me*. Design into your content enough blank spaces so people can fill them in with whatever makes them happiest.

Lie Detection

For example, if you accused an *innocent* person of a crime, the accused generally responds by immediately denying the accusation and asking what is wrong with you for even asking. But the first reaction of guilty people, usually, is to ask what evidence you have. They need to know what you know so they can either double down on the line or confess. Liars confess only if the evidence against them is airtight.

Romance

For example, a man who thinks humans are rational creatures might try to attract a woman by being extra nice. That seems reasonable because people like nice people more than they like mean people. But seduction-wise, niceness is boring, and nice people are a dime a dozen. Niceness can get you only so far.

A far better seduction strategy would involve participating in any kind of coed group activities at which you happen to excel. When you display any kind of talent, it triggers other humans to want to mate with you.

PART 3: HOW PRESIDENT TRUMP DOES WHAT OTHERS CAN'T PRESIDENT TRUMP'S TALENT STACK

In my book *How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big*, I talk about the concept of a talent stack. A talent stack is a collection of skills that work well together and make the person with those skills unique and valuable.

My point is that persuasion was more important to the outcome than policies; we just perceive it to be the other way around.

TRUMP'S ROSIE O'DONNELL MOMENT

In the first Republican debate, on August 6, 2015, Megyn Kelly was moderating, and her first question to Trump should have ended his campaign on the spot. Only a few people in the world could have escaped her trap.

Kelly started to frame her dangerous question by saying, "You've called women you don't like 'fat pigs', 'dogs', 'slobs', and 'disgusting animals...'"

Trump interrupted her by saying, "Only Rosie O'Donnell."

Kelly finished her question and Trump responded with something about the problem of political correctness. But by then it didn't matter. The Rosie O'Donnell reference sucked all the energy out of the room. It was a masterstroke of persuasion, timed perfectly, and executed in front of the world. When I saw it happen, I stood and walked toward the television (literally). I got goosebumps on my arm. *This wasn't normal*. This was persuasion like I have never seen it performed in public. And in that moment, I saw the future unfold. Or I thought I did. It would take another year to be sure.

HOW A MASTER PERSUADER MOVES ENERGY AND FOCUS

consider how a normal, mainstream politician would have handled that trap. Most would have stated positive things about women and tried to change the subject. But that would be a failing strategy because there was so much public record of Trump's past statements about women. It would just keep coming back.

Trump didn't answer the way anyone expected. Trump used his weapons-grade persuasion and stacked together several techniques in a few sentences.

He created an **emotion triggering visual image** (Rosie O'Donnell)

Trump knew his Republican base has a strong negative reaction to O'Donnell, so he bonded with him on that point. This is the persuasion method known as **pacing and leading**. First you match your audience's emotional condition to gain trust, and later you are in a position to lead them.

Trump also used the High-Ground Maneuver by taking the question out of the weeds of what he said in the past and up to the concept of how much it hurts the world to be bound by such silly political correctness.

Inspired by what I saw at the debate, I wrote a blog post that became one of the most viral things I have written. The post was titled "Clown Genius." It was my first step in reframing Trump as a Master Persuader.

THE PERSUASION STACK

High Ground Maneuver

Pundit 1: Your side didn't do enough to end street violence.

Pundit 2: I agree. Luckily we have learned a lot since then. A number of cities experimented with different approaches and some worked better than others. Let's try to find the best practices and see if we can spread them to other cities.

Result: Pundit 1 is framed as the child who has nothing to offer but complaints. Pundit 2 demonstrates an adult understanding of how to solve problems over time.

PERSUASION TIP 13

Use the High-Ground Maneuver to frame yourself as the wise adult in the room. It forces others to join you or be framed as the small thinkers.

Notice I started by fully embracing the criticism from the other side. If you debate the criticism, you stay in a child frame. If you accept it and make a case for learning and improving, you move to the adult high ground and leave the children behind. Whenever you see claims of hypocrisy, you are also likely to see an opportunity for the High-Ground Maneuver.

REASON

We're even emotional about our garbage. Consider the campaign that started decades ago to persuade citizens to recycle. The government can persuade some citizens to recycle simply by saying it is good for the planet. But you get more people to comply by making recycling a semipublic process. Visitors to your house will notice that you either have a recycling bin or not. And you can be sure they will judge you accordingly. And neighbors will see your trash and recyclables sitting by the curb in front of your house on trash pickup day. On its surface, the question of recycling is about resource management. That boring topic wouldn't motivate many people to comply. But because recycling is semipublic by its nature, and people don't want to be branded as bad citizens, they recycle when they know they are being watched. People are motivated to avoid social embarrassment.

ANALOGIES

While analogies are useful and important for explaining new concepts, here's the important point for our purposes: Analogies are *terrible* for persuasion.

Unfortunately, most people believe that analogies are one of the *best* ways to persuade. That fact goes far in explaining why it seems that every debate on the Internet ends with a Hitler analogy. The phenomenon is so common it has its own name: Godwin's law. But I doubt many people have changed an opinion just because a stranger on the Internet compared them to Hitler. A direct attack usually just hardens people into their current opinions.

PERSUASION TIP 14

When you attack a person's belief, the person under attack is more likely to harden his belief than to abandon it, even if your argument is airtight.

HOW TO CREATE MENTAL ANCHORS

The first thing you hear about a new topic automatically becomes an anchor in your mind that biases your future opinions.

You see this technique most often from good negotiators. They open with a ridiculously low or ridiculously high offer to bias other side in that direction. For example, suppose you offer to be my consultant and I have no idea what your services are worth. If the first thing you tell me is

that some clients pay you \$1,000 per hour, I'm more likely to agree to a higher price than if the first number you told me was \$100. The initial number becomes a mental anchor that is hard to move. That's why you should always be the first to offer numbers, even if you were talking about an *entirely different situation*. (Yes, that works. See Robert Cialdini's great book *Pre-Suasion*.)

For example, let's say you are trying to sell your business, and neither you nor your potential buyer knows what it is worth. A business is only as good as its future, and the future is unknown. So there is a lot of bias and guessing involved when anyone buys a one-of-a-kind business. If you are the seller of the business, you want to prime the buyer by mentioning the high price paid by someone else in an *entirely different context*. That's often enough to anchor a person to the high number even though it is a different conversation.

For example, if you would be happy to get \$5 million for your company it might help to have a casual conversation before the negotiations about a billionaire who bought a \$25 million yacht. Once the \$25 million figure gets into your buyer's head - even though it has nothing to do with the company you are selling - it forms an anchor. And it might help you get a higher price.

The human brain forms a bias for the things it hears first. If we accept the thing we hear first, it tends to harden into an irrational belief. And then it is difficult to dislodge. If your friends are reinforcing the idea too, it becomes hard as steel.

HABIT

If you want to influence someone to try a new product, it helps to associate it with some part of an existing habit. For example, people usually follow a consistent routine of shaving, showering, makeup, hair, brushing their teeth, etc.

PERSUASION TIP 15

Studies say humans more easily get addicted to unpredictable rewards than they do to predictable rewards.

ASPIRATIONS

It isn't easy to change people's aspirations, and you would have no reason to try unless the aspirations were somehow harmful or dangerous. But you can improve the power of your persuasion by grafting your story onto people's existing aspirations. You see this a lot in product marketing. For example, Apple tells you that its products will help you be creative. For many people, being more creative is an aspiration. And some financial services companies tell you they will help you be financially independent. That too is an aspiration for most people.

Margin Note: Be a better man

IDENTITY

The next time someone is doing something you find objectionable, don't attack that person's actions. Instead, ask if this is who the person wants to be. Most people think they are good people, even if they sometimes do bad things. If you remind them of their identity, and their aspirations for their identity, you will usually be met with cognitive dissonance and an implied promise to change.

GO BIGLY OR GO HOME

Whenever there is mass confusion and complexity, people automatically gravitate to the strongest, most confident voice.

This reminds me a lot of Trump's strategy of sucking all the energy out of the news cycle until his competition had no way to breathe. If Trump had tiptoed into the election, the mainstream media would have owned him. And they would have treated him like a clown, before moving on to talk about his competition. So Trump didn't tiptoe. He went in so hard, and so provocatively, that the media had no economic choice but to focus on him. He was pure gold for the press. And because of that, he came to own them, at least in the limited sense of dominating their news cycle.

IS PRESIDENT TRUMP A “NATURAL” PERSUADER?

THE NORMAN VINCENT PEALE CONNECTION

the super successful book *The Power of Positive Thinking*. It was a mega-best seller.

PART 4: HOW TO USE PERSUASION IN BUSINESS AND POLITICS HOW TO DESIGN A LINGUISTIC KILL SHOT

LYIN' TED

This was good branding. It was different from anything you have seen in politics and it gave you a reason to pause and wonder why it mattered if the spelling was “lyin” or “lying.” it did matter, but only because you stopped and wondered about it. That is an engineered mental pause for persuasion. Trump wants you to stop and think about the choice of “lyin” over “lying.” The fact that you spent time thinking about it helps you remember the name. It also uses a trick called “making you think past the sale.” In this case the sale is the idea that Ted Cruz lies. You end up accidentally accepting that idea because you spend time thinking about the best way to write “lyin”. That's strong persuasion engineering.

HOW TO USE VISUAL PERSUASION

So if you want to persuade, use visual language and visual imagery.

PERSUASION TIP 18

Visual persuasion is more powerful than nonvisual persuasion, all else being equal. And the difference is large.

The reason the wall imagery was good persuasion is that it was both simple to understand and memorable, compared with a generic concept such as “border control.” And it

made us “think past the sale.” In other words, we reflexively assumed the wall would exist because we had imagined it so often and debated its cost. That’s one of the persuader’s most basic and well-known tricks: People automatically gravitate towards the future they’re imagining most vividly, even if they don’t want the future they are seeing. You’ve probably experienced something similar in your own life. When you vividly imagine something you *don’t* want to happen, such as dropping your phone in the toilet, it can (for some people) increase the odds it will happen. Humans are visual creatures.

HOW TO MAKE PEOPLE IMAGINE YOU AS PRESIDENT

Posted January 26, 2017

I’m having a fun time watching President Trump flood the news cycle with so many stories and outrages that no one can keep up. Here’s how the math of persuasion works in this situation:

1 outrage out of 3 headlines in a week: bad persuasion

25 outrages out of 25 headlines in a week: excellent persuasion

At the moment, there are so many outrages, executive orders, protests, and controversies that none of them can get enough oxygen in our brains. I can’t obsess about problem X because the rest of the alphabet is coming at me at the same time.

When you encounter a situation that is working great except for one identifiable problem, you can focus on the problem and try to fix it. But if you have a dozen complaints at the same time, none of them looks special. The whole situation just looks confusing, and you don’t know where to start. So you wait and see what happens. Humans need contrast in order to make solid decisions turn into action. Trump removed all of your contrast by providing multiple outrages of similar energy.

Participate in activities at which you excel compared with others. People’s impression of you as talented and capable compared with the average participant will spill over to the rest of your personal brand.

In business, always present your ideas in the context of our alternatives that are clearly worse. Don’t just sell your proposed solution; slime all the other options with badness.

If someone you know is treating a small issue as a big one, remind them what a big problem looks like. That can reframe how they process their small worries.

Always remember that people make decisions in the context of alternatives. If you aren’t framing the alternatives as bad, you are not persuading at all.

HOW TO PERSUADE BY ASSOCIATION

One of the easiest forms of persuasion involves associating one image or idea with another in a way that makes some of the goodness (or badness) of one rub off on the other. That’s the idea behind celebrity endorsements, labeling political opponents Nazis, and marketing in general. But you already knew that.

What you might not know is that each of us is “marketing” all the time. If you want to be liked and respected, you have to watch your accidental associations. For example, I know people who think bathroom humor is hilarious. I'm not here to judge their sense of humor, as that is subjective. The problem is that these folks think that sharing this sort of humor is nothing more than a laugh. But it is a *lot* more. It is persuasion by association. And if you tell enough bathroom jokes, your friends and family will literally start subconsciously associating you with shit. They might not be aware of the accidental persuasion. The way it manifests is that suddenly your friends feel too busy to get together with you.

When I was younger, I made all of the mistakes of association that I'm mentioning, and more. I figured that if something was funny, or appalling, it needed to be shared, all in the spirit of fun. My more experienced self tries to stick to topics that are interesting, useful, and positive. I still like jokes, obviously, but not the gross kind that lack cleverness.

As a general rule, I try to fill my brain with optimistic thoughts in order to crowd out the bad ones that sometimes slip in. This is a form of self-hypnosis, using the power of association. The positive thoughts lift my energy, which in turn lifts my mood, and even my immune system.

If you want to make a good first impression, don't jokingly complain about the traffic on the way over. Try to work into the initial conversation some positive thoughts and images. Any positivity works. If your positivity has some visual imagery, that is even better. As the old saying goes, people won't always remember what you said, but they almost always remember how you made them feel.

HOW TO CREATE EFFECTIVE CAMPAIGN SLOGANS AND LOGOS

THE MOLE

Persuaders know that humans put more importance on the first part of a sentence than the second part. Our first impressions are hard to dislodge. And the first impression of those tweets—lots of them—involved imagining Trump winning the election.

GODZILLA GETS IN THE GAME (OR DOES HE?)

By August I was putting a name to Godzilla because I had learned that he had advised President Obama in his 2012 campaign. When I first saw Godzilla's fingerprints on the election, I had no idea he had ever worked on a presidential campaign. But according to the *New York Times*, he had. The *New York Times* reported in November 2012, after Obama's unexpected victory:

[The] Obama campaign also had a panel of unpaid academic advisers. The group—which calls itself the “consortium of behavioral scientists,” or COBS—provided ideas on how to counter false rumors, like one that President Obama is a Muslim. It suggested how to characterize the Republican opponent, Mitt Romney, in advertisements. It also delivered research-based advice on how to mobilize voters.

HOW TO CREATE TWO WAYS TO WIN, NO WAY TO LOSE

The next time you are in a discussion about strategy, either in business or in your personal life, listen to everyone else's suggestions and then top them with a "two ways to win, no way to lose" play, assuming your situation allows for that. You'll find that it ends every strategy discussion. No one picks one way to win and infinite ways to lose if they have an option of two ways to win and no way to lose.

PERSUASION TIP 24

If you can frame your preferred strategy as two ways to win and no way to lose, almost no one will disagree with your suggested path because it is a natural High-Ground Maneuver.

HOW TO USE THE HIGH-GROUND MANEUVER

Posted July 19, 2010

I'm sure you're all following the iPhone 4 story. If you hold the phone a certain way, it drops calls.

In a press conference on the subject, Steve Jobs said, "We're not perfect. Phones are not perfect. We all know that. But we want to make our users happy."

Jobs got a lot of heat about his response. Where was the apology? Where was the part where he acknowledged that the buck stops with him, and that Apple made a big mistake that never should have happened? That's Public Relations 101, right?

I'm a student of how language influence people. Apple's response to the iPhone 4 problem didn't follow the public relations playbook because Jobs decided to rewrite the playbook. (I pause now to insert the necessary phrase "magnificent bastard.") If you want to know what genius looks like, study Jobs's words: "We're not perfect. Phones are not perfect. We all know that. But we want to make our users happy."

Jobs changed the entire argument with nineteen words. He was brief. He spoke indisputable truth. And later in his press conference, he offered clear fixes.

Did it work? Check out the media response. There's lots of talk about whether other smartphones are perfect or not. There's lots of talk about whether Jobs's response was the right one. But the central question that was in everyone's head before the press conference—"Is the iPhone 4 a dud?"—has, well, evaporated. Part of the change in attitude is because the fixes Apple offered are adequate. But those faces easily could have become part of the joke if handled in an apologetic "please kick me" way.

I have long had a name for Jobs's clever move. I call it the "High-Ground Maneuver." I first noticed an executive using it years ago, and I've since used it a number of times when the situation called for it. The move involves taking an argument up to a level where you can say

something that is absolutely true while changing the context at the same time. Once the move has been executed, the other participants will fear appearing small-minded if they drag the argument back to the detail level. It's an instant game changer.

For example, if a military drone accidentally kills civilians, and there is a public outcry, it would be a mistake for the military to spend too much time talking about what went wrong with that particular mission. The High-Ground Maneuver would go something like this: "War is messy. No one wants civilians to die. We will study the situation to see how we can better avoid it in the future."