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**THE UNDER  
DOG**

*How Ordinary People  
Change the Minds of the Powerful*

**EDGE**

*...and Live to Tell About It*

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**AMY SHOWALTER**

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## Chapter 2

### Extreme Influence Tactic #1: Build Your Street Cred

*“Those who play by the rules and work hard go to the top of my list.”*

— Former Congressman Jim Ross Lightfoot

*“The track record and reputation matters. If I have a question mark in my mind, it takes longer to get there with me.”*

— Jo Ann Davidson, Former Ohio Speaker of the House and Former Co-Chair, Republican National Committee

*“Whether a potential employee, friend or spouse, the right person is most often the one you choose in the first ten minutes. More often less than a minute.”*

— Robert Lanier

“All humans make snap judgments, and the busier people get, the more they rely on these snap judgments,” said Dr. Kelton Rhoads, who teaches influence psychology at the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Southern California. “People revere these decisions when they refer to having ‘a gut feeling’ and ‘an excellent sense of intuition.’ Come to think of it, when have you ever heard anyone say they *don’t* have excellent intuitive ability? *Everybody* has awesome intuitive powers; just ask if you doubt it.

“In our culture, we are uniquely set against the concepts of ‘bias’ and ‘prejudice,’” Dr. Rhoads continued. “But in point of fact, all human brains function on the basis of ‘bias,’ which consists of thinking of shortcuts that allow us to arrive at a decision without a lot of mental effort and on the basis of applying past learning and judgments to present situations.

“For good and ill, bias and prejudice are efficient. Humans are indeed ‘cognitive misers,’ and powerful people are no different. They are perhaps even *less reflective than average*,” said Rhoads, “because they’re generally overwhelmed with time constraints and social pressures.”

Based on Dr. Rhoads, everything you do accumulates. So knowing about your past actions, statements, and even those you affiliate with allow top dogs to whirl you in their mental food processor and develop an opinion that influences whether they will grant you access and time. But what kind of mental shortcuts do they use?

I’ve found they’re partial to the following five characteristics:

- your reputation,
- your presentation,
- your possible suffering,
- your playing by the rules, and
- your being unbiased.

Then, if you pass that test, others will listen to the merits of your argument.

## ***Your Reputation: The Past is Prologue***

As I interviewed powerful individuals whose minds were changed through underdog influence, almost all listened to the underdogs not just because of *what they said* but because of *who they were*. Without my asking specifically about the person's reputation or credibility, this factor rose to the top as a key characteristic for high-achieving underdog influencers.

Here's a sampling of unfiltered comments made by big dogs as they told me their stories:

"If I have heard good things about you or the group you are affiliated with, that helps."

"I had heard that she had a good reputation in the community, and I knew her husband."

"They were well-known and well-respected religious leaders in my district."

"She was very credible and a well-known person in the area."

"He was a nice guy, well respected in the business world."

"I did not know her, but I was very aware of her organization."

"I never met her, but the woman was credible to me because she tried to find other avenues for help."

"I knew about her through my staff who went to church with them."

Can you discern the pattern? It reveals that *reputation* matters. A good reputation becomes a shortcut to determining the merits of your argument without weighing it in a mindful way. It substitutes for consideration because accessing someone's reputation is easier than plodding through data and arguments. Dr. Rhoads added jokingly, "In fact, I abused this bias tremendously as a college student. It was always my goal to get a high score on the *first* test to set my 'reputation.' Then subsequent mediocre work during the rest of the class was viewed through the rose-colored lens of that first test."

Former Ohio Congressman Clarence Brown who served in the U.S. Congress for 17 years admitted, "I was not noted for my interest in the environment." However, a woman in his district, Claire

Mae Fredrick, approached him about the Cedar Bog nature area that would become depleted if a highway were built through it. She wanted Congressman Brown to get the Cedar Bog area declared a nature preserve, which would then prevent the highway bypass project.

“I was an Eagle Scout, I got my Bird Merit Badge, but I wasn’t deeply interested in this Cedar Bog issue. I got elected on economic issues, not environmental issues. Claire Fredrick was a biology teacher at the local college. I knew *of* her but didn’t have any kind of relationship with her. I knew she had a good standing in the community. And I knew her husband was the county coroner,” he said.

Congressman Brown decided to take on her case based not only on what she said but on her reputation. He and his staff investigated the situation, agreed with her views, and worked to gain a federally protected nature preserve status for Cedar Bog. In fact, he worked *against* his political party who favored building the highway. Mrs. Fredrick’s reputation brought the issue to his attention, and he allocated resources to fulfill her request.

The most scrutinized part of one’s reputation is whether the person is deemed trustworthy or not. And while you might think the term “trustworthy” is easy to define, Dr. Rhoads explained that ‘trustworthiness’ is highly relative. “Would a placard-carrying member of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, a radical group opposing meat eating, fur, hunting, etc.) consider the editor of *Field and Stream* to be trustworthy? Probably not. So elements of ‘Are you on my side?’ and ‘Do you agree with my morality?’ fit into the equation.

Noted Dr. Rhoads, “We heard this a lot during the years Bill Clinton was president. I’d hear my students say, ‘I don’t approve of his personal morality, but his policies are great.’ A lot of Americans who would think thrice before leaving their daughter alone in a room with President Clinton nonetheless thought he was a wonderful guy to have in office.

“So we make allowances for certain types of untrustworthiness *and* are exceedingly harsh on others,” Dr. Rhoads cautioned. “But which do we allow and which do we excoriate? We tolerate untrustworthiness that conveniently lets us have the world the way we want it. And we rain down hell on forms of untrustworthiness in those who oppose our world view.”

### ***Your Reputation: The First Impression is Final***

The research indicated that people who are adept at correctly reading others aren’t smarter than those who can’t. They just spend a lot of time with people—which is exactly what powerful people do. As former Congressman Lightfoot noted, “We listen to a lot of people and get good at telling whether someone is honest or not.”

Powerful people are among the highest-paid listeners around. After all, listening is essentially how they spend their time. From board meetings to special interest group meetings to committee hearings to town hall gatherings to constituent meetings. That makes mastering first impressions a

major piece in the underdog influence puzzle. The more time people spend listening to and interacting with others, the more skilled they are at accurately making snap judgments.

### **Snap Judgments**

David Funder, professor of psychology at the University of California at Riverside, noted that snap judgments are *reliable* judgments, especially among people who spend a lot of time with other people.<sup>i</sup> This doesn't apply to those who belong to 72 online communities and don't interact outside of their computer screen. Rather, it depends on spending time with human beings, *in person*.

His studies have found that two observers often reach a consensus about a third person, and their assessments accurately match the third person's assessment of himself or herself. "We can be fooled, of course, but we're more often right than wrong," Professor Funder commented.

Psychologists have noted that snap judgments occur when clues hit us simultaneously and form a final impression. What do you think when you receive the following signals: A man with a soggy handshake? A woman with a mellifluous voice? Anyone with excessive tattoos? A woman with dagger-like fingernails? Those who wear a Rolex watch? Admit it—you form a laser-like impression based on those signals.

Many like to think that they don't judge books by their cover, but indeed people do. They can't help it. And those judgments can be amazingly accurate.

"I couldn't care less what people say about how they judge others," said Dr. Frank Bernieri, an Oregon State University professor who conducts experiments in nonverbal communications. "I'm interested in what takes place instantaneously, reflexively, subconsciously and immediately."<sup>ii</sup> According to Dr. Bernieri, impression making is all over in the first 30 seconds.

In one of his experiments, untrained subjects were shown 30-second video segments of job applicants greeting interviewers. The subjects rated the applicants on qualities such as self-assurance, competence, and likeability. Then trained interviewers conducted 20-minute interviews with the same job applicants and were asked to complete a four-page evaluation of each applicant. The evaluations of the trained interviewers who spent 20 minutes interviewing the applicants did *not* differ from those of the untrained observers who watched 30 seconds of videotape!

"Yes, people do judge books by their covers. First impressions predict final impressions," Dr. Bernieri noted. First impressions lead to what social psychologists call the "confirmation bias." He said, "In social psychology, there is an amazing amount of literature and research showing that once we have any expectation—any working theory, any working hypothesis—we are biased in the way we process information. We go out of our way to seek confirming evidence. However, in our minds, we think we're being analytical and processing the whole time. So by the time we finish, we think our judgments are based on the data."<sup>iii</sup>

## **Image**

The workplace is particularly brutal to those who make an unfavorable first/final impression. According to Megan Hustad, author of *How to Be Useful*, your image is most relevant when first meeting your co-workers. If you make a poor first impression, it's almost impossible to adjust upwardly others' expectations of you.

This reminded me of the co-worker I was introduced to years ago. After pleasantries were exchanged, she made sure I knew she had pet snakes and that she slept with them. I'm all for workplace diversity, but this initial mental image threw me. It got worse when she brought the molted snake skins to the office and proudly displayed them on her bulletin board. Let the reptilian rights crowd come after me, but I just couldn't get over imagining her sleeping with her snakes! My co-workers and I never viewed her as a serious professional, and she left the company a year later, I hope to a more reptilian-friendly workplace.

Digging deeper into the nuances of first/final impressions, Amy Cuddy of Harvard Business School, Susan Fiske of Princeton, and Peter Glick of Lawrence University have developed a new model to further delineate how we quickly judge others. All over the world, it turns out, people judge others on two main qualities: warmth and competence. Are they friendly with good intentions? Do they have the ability to deliver on those intentions?

As human beings, it makes sense that we would abhor cold, incompetent folks. But Cuddy and her colleagues found that we respond with ambivalence to other personality blends, too. For example, warm and incompetent people elicit pity and benign neglect; competent but cold personality types foster envy and a desire to harm. Thus, warmth and competence becomes the winning combination.<sup>iv</sup>

## **Appearance**

Woe be to those underdogs who don't manage their first impression! It can certainly doom their top dog's desire to help. Here's more evidence why this is true.

For this book, I conducted a focus group with prominent D.C.-area lobbyists. Given the leveling of the playing field for persuasion tools available (e.g., grassroots lobbying, Political Action Committees, social media opportunities, and more), I asked the lobbyists how they typically gain an advantage over their opponents. As one candidly admitted, "Well, something that doesn't cost much but is very effective is how you present yourself. I love it when environmental lobbyists and their grassroots advocates meet with a legislator right before I do. Typically, they don't leave a good first impression. Their appearance is unprofessional, so I always look better by comparison."

Based on this lobbyist's experience and Dr. Bernieri's findings, could the environmental lobbyists be perceived as less organized, less competent, and less responsive than those who have a more orderly appearance? If the people they want to influence don't share their same values and hence don't give

them the benefit of the doubt, this is a distinct possibility. You can take a chance that your first impression works if you have a sympathetic or like-minded audience, but that's not the point. Because you're focused on persuading those who have views averse to ours, you're wise to play the percentages. That means *managing* your first impression so it works to your advantage.

Rick Scott would agree. Elected to be Florida's governor in November, 2010, he's the former CEO of Columbia/HCA, at one time the largest hospital company in the nation. In 1996, *Time* magazine listed Scott as one of the 25 most influential Americans. He has since founded Solantic, a string of 23 urgent-care facilities, and he also runs an investment company. There, he listens to a lot of "pitches" (formal and informal) from people who want him to invest in their enterprises. In his experience, the younger the person, the more important it is to make a favorable "first/final impression."

As Scott advised, "How people getting started present themselves is extremely important because they don't have a track record. Young people who do present themselves well can get a lot accomplished."

I was reminded of this dynamic when I delivered a training workshop for a leading national nonprofit organization. Day one consisted of persuasion training while day two was a visit to the State House to meet with state representatives and senators. One workshop participant (who showed up without registering, which should have been the first warning) was wearing a "picnic casual" outfit of shorts and a baggy top, complete with the ubiquitous water sandals in case the room flooded. My client and I worried. What if this person visited the State House with us the next day? If he did, what would be his future wardrobe choices? When one of the organization's leaders reminded him about wearing "traditional business attire" to the State House, he took offense, stating, "I think legislators appreciate the novelty of different attire." Actually, they don't—unless different attire makes your message more vivid (like doctors wearing white lab coats). So my client adroitly counseled this individual not to participate in the State House visit unless he was willing to don traditional business attire. The possibility of his wearing "picnic casual" again wasn't worth risking the organization's carefully protected brand.

Yes, it's crucial to dress appropriately for the situation and let your personal style come through. You can do that and *still* show respect to those you are petitioning. In fact, failure to do so communicates that you care more about yourself, your comfort, and your "style" (and I'm using that word extremely loosely) than the person you want to persuade. Remember, it's about *them*, not *you*.

Here are additional research findings about one's appearance:

Those who show skin and tattoos are recommending themselves for low-level positions. (That said, if you're pursuing a job in the tattoo industry or a position in a highly creative industry, having tattoos are an advantage.)

- More skin = less power.
- Men with long hair are viewed as creative.

- Women with medium-length brown hair are judged as outgoing.
- Women who show cleavage are judged poorly at work

As the speed of life and transactions increase, style and clothing become a person's visual vocabulary. Exhibiting care and style with your visual vocabulary conveys two things: (1) meeting with others is worthwhile and (2) you are a person of interest. Your appearance announces to the world that you have assumed command of yourself, which communicates confidence. And showing you have confidence in your message can sway *people even more than your expertise can*.

### **Confidence vs. Expertise**

If you wonder why media pundits who failed to predict the 2008 economic crisis are still employed and giving advice, the reason has to do with how people view confidence—another factor in understanding the final/first impression.

Recent research by Don Moore of Carnegie Mellon University indicates that people prefer advice from a confident source, even to the point of being willing to forgive a poor track record from that source.

In Moore's experiment, volunteers were given cash for correctly guessing the weight of people from their photographs. In each of the eight rounds of the study, the guessers bought advice from one of four other volunteer "advisors." The guessers were given information on how confident each advisor was. For example, one advisor would say there was a 70 percent chance the person's weight was 170-179 pounds, a 15 percent chance it was 160-169, etc. A more confident advisor would focus on one weight range and say there was a 100 percent chance the weight was within the 170-179 range. Here's the catch: In each round, before they chose their advisor, the volunteers saw each advisor's expressed percent of certainty but not the associated weight ranges.

What happened? From the start, the more confident advisors found more buyers for their advice. This caused the advisors to give answers that were more and more precise as the game progressed. Any escalation in precision disappeared when the guessers had to choose whether or not to buy the advice of a single advisor. Indeed, in the later rounds, guessers tended to avoid advisors who had been wrong previously, but this effect was more than outweighed by the bias shown toward confidence. Moore said that following the advice of the most confident person often makes sense due to evidence that precision and expertise go hand in hand. One indication is that people give a narrower range of answers when asked about subjects with which they're more familiar.<sup>v</sup>

However, Moore observed that sometimes this link breaks down. With complex but politicized subjects such as global warming, for example, scientific experts who stress uncertainties lose out to those who deliver a more emphatic message. Moore argued that in competitive situations, this tendency can drive those offering advice to increasingly exaggerate how sure they are.

## Charisma

For more from the “it’s not what you say, it’s how you say it” school, look to Dr. Alex “Sandy” Pentland of MIT whose research focuses on measuring charisma. Before you dismiss the idea that charisma can be measured and cue up New Age music, read on.

While at a party, Dr. Pentland and his colleague Daniel Olguin placed recording devices on several executives. These devices recorded data about their vocal tone, gestures, proximity to others, and more throughout the evening. Five days later, the same executives presented business plans to a panel of judges in a contest. Without reading or hearing their presentations, Dr. Pentland correctly forecast the winners with 87 percent accuracy by only applying data collected at the party. How did he correctly predict the winners? By measuring the intangibles—what he calls “honest signals”—that are powerful predictors of persuasion.

Pentland referred to “honest signals” as signs that cause changes in the recipient of one’s communication—the influence prospect. It’s a term that describes nonverbal cues people use socially to coordinate their behavior themselves. These cues include gestures, expressions, and tone of voice. His team looks at how much you face those you’re talking to, how close you stand to them, and how much you let them talk. He called his approach “obtaining a God’s-eye view” because the “honest signals” can’t be faked. In fact, when people become aware of them and try to consciously change their delivery, they become more self-conscious and hence less persuasive.

Dr. Pentland’s team also found that successful people are more energetic than the average person. They might talk more, but they also listen more, and they spend more face-to-face time with people. They pick up cues from others, draw them out, and get them to be more outgoing. He noted that it’s not only the signals they *send* that make them charismatic; it’s what they *elicit* from others. “Positive, energetic people have higher performance. We’re proving that,” said Dr. Pentland.

While people may intuitively know that charismatic team players are more successful, it’s been thought of as an imprecise attribute, making it a “nice” but not “necessary” quality to develop in our teams. However, Dr. Pentland stated, “Because we can measure it, social intuition is no longer magic; it’s now quantitative science.” Therefore, it can be trusted.<sup>vi</sup>

Dr. Pentland’s evidence corresponds with advice from Randy Colvin, associate professor of psychology at Northeastern University in Boston. He agrees that it’s best to let those “honest signals” come through and not mask one’s intentions. Doing so is counterproductive. Colvin has found that “the people who are easiest to judge are the most mentally healthy. Their exterior behavior mimics their internal views of themselves. What you see is what you get.”<sup>vii</sup>

People like other people who are easy to read—what I like to call “blurtatious.” As Dr. Bernieri reminded us, “If people look at you and think they’re seeing right into you, then they tend to like you. If

you have a poker face, if you're reserved, then you're a more difficult read. People seem not to like that."<sup>viii</sup>

Many work environments sanitize individuality, which can attenuate persuasion. You know them when you see them—the excessively “professional” employee who communicates devoid of emotion or “unapproved” expressions. I’m all for appropriate professional behavior, but I’ve met some workers for whom I’m afraid if their face peeled off, you’d see a circuit board.

Bottom line? If we can’t read someone, we like that person less than those we can read. And if we like them less, we are less apt to say “yes” to what they propose.

## ***Your Suffering***

Once you’ve managed your “final” impression, you can have even more credibility if you demonstrate suffering, especially suffering for your beliefs. Let me explain with a story.

Former Florida State Representative Janegale Boyd is the president and CEO of the Florida Association of Homes and Services for the Aging. Although Boyd wasn’t an expert in state retirement system law, she told me about a woman who compelled her to quickly become one. At the time, if a state employee died at the “wrong time” (within a few days or weeks before becoming vested in the state retirement system), the family received no death benefits.

“One day, a woman called and poured her heart out to my staffer,” explained Boyd. “Her husband, a correctional facility guard, had died of a heart attack a couple of days before being vested to receive full retirement benefits. When the woman called staff in three other state offices, she was told, ‘This is the law; we can’t change it.’ I was outraged about this situation. I knew the law needed to be changed.

“The woman’s appeal was desperate and highly personal,” continued Boyd. “I learned that she and her husband were good citizens who paid their taxes. She didn’t want to get welfare despite being eligible for it. Knowing that helped persuade me to take action because I understood she wanted to do the most honorable thing. She was credible because she had looked at various ways to work through the system. Further, she was caring for her disabled daughter and her mom who had Alzheimer’s.

Boyd took this woman’s concern to the Department of Retirement to see about changing the law that would make her husband’s retirement payments retroactive. After sitting down with officials at the Department of Retirement, Boyd introduced a Special Claims Bill that would make spouses of people who died within days of being vested eligible for full retirement benefits. “Today, any person whose spouse dies within a year of retirement is eligible for the money owed. This woman made it happen. And I never met her until the bill was introduced,” she concluded.

To me, one of the most puzzling yet encouraging aspects of credibility is suffering. Yes, people ascribe credibility to those who have been hurt, which seems to contradict what's known about expertise and evidence as credibility boosters. But to be encouraging, it reinforces that we are indeed human beings rather than automatons. And on the dark side, it explains the victim mentality and ability of "smart" people to make stupid decisions based on the (self-proclaimed) victim status of others.

Suffering infers credibility. I was reminded of this when reading the results of a February 2009 Harris Poll. In the poll, people were asked to name their heroes and state why they were considered heroes. Among the reasons mentioned most often were these:

*"Doing what's right regardless of personal consequences"* (89%)

*"Not giving up until the goal is accomplished"* (83%)

*"Overcoming adversity"* (81%)

Translation: *heroes suffer*. Everyone likes a hero; everyone wants to help a hero. So if you have legitimately suffered, you need to let your top dog know.

## ***Your Playing by the Rules***

Top dogs have an innate desire to help those who play by the rulebook. Doing so proves you're a moral person, at least to a degree. And as Dr. Vandello stated in Chapter 1, underdogs are usually viewed as more moral than others. Therefore, by helping moral people, we capture some of their good qualities, if only psychologically.

"I am the only living human being who has cut the IRS budget and lived to tell about it," bragged former Congressman Jim Ross Lightfoot from Iowa. In the mid-'80s, Iowa experienced a farm credit crisis. Farmer after farmer dealt with high interest rates that forced them to go bankrupt and sell their farms. In many instances, Iowa bankers told farmers they would simply write off the bad debt, no questions asked. However, the IRS learned about that arrangement and decided to count the forgiven loan money as income. Soon after, they received a "love letter" in the form of an income tax bill.

As Lightfoot recalled, "We received tons of desperate calls and letters, many times right before someone's farm was going on the auction block to pay the IRS. It got so bad, I had my district office staff go to their homes and spend the night with them, they were so distraught.

"I was especially moved when a young man walked into my district office and told his story with tears rolling down his cheeks. He'd done everything right, his outstanding farm loan was forgiven, he got a new job, he was putting his life back together, and then he got a \$42,000 bill from the IRS!

"I was enraged. So I pushed through a piece of legislation stating that farmers were exempt from paying taxes on their forgiven loan amounts. It was just for farmers and specifically for the

situation in Iowa during that time. “Those who play by the rules and work hard go to the top of my list,” he declared.

What did the play-by-the-rules farmer have in common with Janegayle Boyd’s underdog? They both suffered!

Bob Benham, whom you read about in Chapter 1, played by the rules and suffered, *and* he went on to persuade key lawmakers to his point of view by employing the playing-by-the-rules concept. Here’s what happened.

Today, some products and services purchased over the Internet are taxed, depending on which jurisdiction the online retailer operates from. But in 2000, a debate fired up between those who wanted a totally tax-free Internet and those who wanted to level the playing field to a degree between online retailers and physical stores. According to a June 2000 article in *The Wall Street Journal*, “The road to a tax-free Internet looked smooth and clear in Congress. Then an oddball coalition came along.” That oddball coalition shifted the debate and made Internet taxation a reality. The same article reported that “...this turn of events can be explained in large measure by people such as Bob Benham.”<sup>ix</sup>

Bob owns an upscale Oklahoma City women’s fashion store, Balliet’s. In the late 1990s, Bob witnessed Internet sales chipping away at his profits and those of other Oklahoma brick-and-mortar retailers. He became more concerned when people wanted to exchange items purchased online or alter the clothing they bought on the Internet. “I joked that we do virtual alterations on all Internet purchases. You need a good sense of humor to keep this thing in perspective,” Bob said.

Instead of seething, Bob took action. He began meeting with numerous members of Congress and their staff. He sent more than 300 personal communications to members of Congress urging them to support the Sales Tax Fairness and Simplification Act. As it turned out, one of his biggest challenges was persuading his own representative, Congressman Ernest Istook.

“Congressman Istook is a pro-business guy drawn to positions that reduce taxes or prevent new taxes. I had two meetings with him. He was opposed to Congress even being engaged on this issue—very opposed. But he didn’t know about the unfairness of the current tax structure in lost sales tax revenue to his district. I told him stories of customers coming to our cosmetics counter to learn about new products from our staff and then ordering them online. Now, we retailers promote Oklahoma City and happily contribute sales tax to Oklahoma City, but this situation was unfair.”

Bob especially drew Istook’s attention—and that of other members of Congress—by saying, “We retailers sponsor the Little League teams, buy tables at charity events, hold fashion shows to benefit nonprofits. When was the last time a dot-com did a charity fashion show in your district?” They realized that Bob’s company played by the rules and gave back to the community while online stores received financial benefits without any participation. These retailers suffered by doing the right thing—and that wasn’t fair.

These days, more goods and services purchased on the Internet are taxed, thanks (or not, depending on your viewpoint) to the fairness argument of Bob Benham. He helped those who disagreed with him see the issue differently. In doing so, he became the apotheosis of all aspiring underdogs. His efforts were even chronicled in a front-page, above-the-fold issue of *The Wall Street Journal* and featured his portrait captured in the *Journal's* classic grainy style.<sup>x</sup>

## ***Your Being Unbiased***

It's easy to get so emotionally attached to your cause that you forget there's another side to the story—your *opponent's* side. Many unsuccessful underdog persuaders are just chemically incapable of seeing the other side (the “yaktivists” and “advocates” come to mind). But bias exists, and those who reside on the other side of the road feel just as strongly as you do. It's also easy to assume that a strong argument showcasing the best evidence carries the day. But in fact, research shows that using logical arguments as a tactic can backfire.

Political scientists are starting to catch up with what social psychologists have long known—that fact-based arguments only work with certain people and in certain situations. People might think they're smart and deliberative if they believe that logic and facts sway them. But if that were true, let's face it, no one would ever smoke, eat too much, or drink too much.

Here's evidence. In a series of studies in 2005 and 2006, researchers at the University of Michigan found that when misinformed people, particularly political partisans, were exposed to corrected facts in news stories, they rarely changed their minds. In fact, they often became even more strongly set in their beliefs. Conveying facts, they found, did not “cure” misinformation. Like an underpowered antibiotic, facts could actually make misinformation even *stronger*.<sup>xi</sup>

My friend and mentor, the wise Vickie Sullivan, has often reminded me that “in every heresy, there's a grain of truth.” That's what ineffective underdogs can overlook when presenting a case. They can't imagine any truth in their opponents' arguments, so they clobber them with tendentious facts about why their perspective is the best.

Your top dog is not only exposed to *your* carefully honed arguments and evidence; he or she also hears counterarguments, thus requiring you to present both sides of your position. Early experiments on the effects of one-sided versus two-sided presentations from researchers Linda Golden and Mark Alpert show that two-sided presentations are more effective under two conditions: 1) when your persuasion prospect is exposed to subsequent counterarguments, and 2) when your prospect is initially opposed to your point of view.<sup>xii</sup>

In addition, the cerebral abilities of audience members influence which type of arguments you should use. Is your top dog highly educated? If so, use two-sided arguments. People with education and status tend to be more persuaded by two-sided arguments. In contrast, those with little education tend to be more influenced by one-sided presentations.

Congressman Mike Honda of California admitted that hearing both sides of an argument creates a favorable influence environment for him. “The most successful influencers tell me the context of their situations without prejudice. They give both sides. When I ask professional lobbyists what the other side says and they can’t tell me, that informs my decision-making process. Some lobbyists are truthful, some are not.”

The objectivity of an outside expert influenced Jim Buchy, former Ohio State Representative and Director of the Ohio Department of Agriculture. He said, “The Ohio Department of Natural Resources wanted a program that would provide money for farmers to insert buffer strips around their land for stream runoff. The goal was to stop runoff, which I agreed with. But I wasn’t in favor of the government paying the farmers to do what they should do on their own.

“A knowledgeable agronomist who was politically astute proved to be more objective than others with similar expertise,” Buchy continued. “He impressed me because we had a similar philosophy, but sometimes he gave me answers I was unhappy with. In contrast, another individual I dealt with regularly on Ag issues showed such an evident bias that I couldn’t get any objectivity from him. The credible agronomist guy told me that we could use the budget money to educate small farmers to be more personally responsible. The personal responsibility angle resonated with me. I finally supported the initiative after opposing it in the beginning.”

Contrary to what popular culture preaches, it’s *not* all about you. So to gain the credibility you need, you have to give your top dog *both* sides of the argument.

### ***Your Credibility: Once Lost, Forever Lost?***

What if, before you knew better, you did exactly the opposite of what successful underdog influencers do to build and maintain their credibility? Say you now have little or no credibility. Can you ever get it back? To all whose credibility has fallen short, Dr. Rhoads offered this encouragement: “Credibility is seldom irrevocably lost if the player is committed to rebuilding it. Part of the rehabilitation depends on what elements of credibility have been lost. Trust is harder to rehabilitate than ignorance or incompetence, for example.

“But credibility is a dynamic concept,” he explained. “I’m sure you’ve heard that ‘once credibility is lost, it’s lost forever,’ but nothing could be further from the truth. A person’s or a corporation’s or a nation’s reputation is in constant flux, waxing and waning depending on moves that are made.

“So when the wheels come off your credibility and you end up in the ditch, don’t give up. You lose the credibility game only if you end the game once you hit the ditch.”

## ***Checklist for Underdogs—How to Build Your Street Cred***

- ✓ Be aware that all people—especially busy, powerful people—use mental shortcuts based on their biases. “Powerful people are likely *less reflective* than average people because they’re generally overwhelmed with time constraints and social pressures.” (Dr. Kelton Rhoads)
- ✓ Don’t forget that your past is prologue—*what you do accumulates*. Your reputation presents a mental shortcut for those who don’t know you and who are averse to your position. How are you proactively managing your reputation to get what you want in five or ten years?
- ✓ Remember that top dogs listen to others. A lot. That makes them adept at reading behavior and assessing credibility.
- ✓ Make mountains out of moments. You’ve got 30 seconds to show warmth and competence. The first impression is the final impression.
- ✓ Be confident. Because people tend to be “cognitive misers,” confidence matters as much or more than expertise.
- ✓ Dressing appropriately for the occasion shows consideration of your top dog. Clothing is your visual vocabulary.
- ✓ Incorporate legitimate suffering for your cause or belief system into your message whenever possible.
- ✓ Let others know how you followed the rules. Fairness resonates with top dogs because they have an innate desire to help those who stick to the rulebook. It gives you credibility as a moral person, and by helping you, they view themselves as more moral.
- ✓ Get your opponents’ arguments out there as well as your own and be as unbiased as possible. Remember, “In every heresy, there’s a grain of truth.” (Vickie Sullivan)
- ✓ Be blurtatious. People like others who are easy to read.
- ✓ Don’t end your credibility journey if you land in the ditch. You can gain it back if you commit to rebuilding it.

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<sup>i</sup> Carlin Flora, "The First Impression," *Psychology Today*, May 14, 2004.

[www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200405/the-first-impression?page=2](http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200405/the-first-impression?page=2).

<sup>ii</sup> Jenni Laidman, "Making an Impression" *Toledo Blade*, Monday, June 25, 2001.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Marina Krakovsky, "Mixed Impressions," *Scientific American Mind*, January/February 2010.

<sup>v</sup> Moore, D. A., & Healy, P. J. (2008). The trouble with overconfidence. *Psychological Review*, 115(2), 502-517.

<sup>vi</sup> "We Can Measure the Power of Charisma," *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2010.

<sup>vii</sup> Carlin Flora, "The First Impression," *Psychology Today*, May 14, 2004.

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<sup>viii</sup> Jenni Laidman, "Making an Impression," *Toledo Blade*, Monday, June 25, 2001.

<sup>ix</sup> Gerald Seib and Jim Vandehei, "A Lobbying Machine Springs Up to Revive Issue of Internet Taxes," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 29, 2000.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Joe Keohane, "How Facts Backfire: Researchers Discover a Surprising Threat to Democracy: Our Brains," *The Boston Globe*, July 11, 2010.

<sup>xii</sup> Linda L. Golden and Mark I. Alpert, "Comparative Analysis of the Relative Effectiveness of One- and Two-Sided Communication for Contrasting Products," *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 16, No. 1, M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1987, pp. 18-25+68. [www.jstor.org/stable/4188610](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4188610).