Concede to Win – by Daniel T. Richards

We’re all guilty of letting an argument get out of hand. Where values run deep, emotions run high. It happens. The Internet is lousy with methods for avoiding rhetorical rumbles. From meditation, to yoga, to breathing exercises, to finding “your happy place”, it’s hard to fathom that you might need or want another method to keep tension down during a debate.

So here’s another one: Agree with your opponent.

If it sounds crazy, that’s because it is. Crazy effective. And unlike chi-oriented or mental methods, the concede technique will not only help you keep cool but also further your rhetorical goals. Two birds, one concession.

Remember that “winning” an argument is not a rhetor’s goal. And you can often achieve your goal while “losing” the argument. One of the fastest ways to achieve your goals is to let your opponents think they’ve won.

Here are three techniques for staying calm and conceding your way to victory:

Acknowledgement As Agreement: I Heard You

Sometimes people just want to be heard. Tap into your inner psychiatrist and continually acknowledge your opponent’s arguments and existence. Being a good, interested listener disarms your opponent, making him less hostile and the situation emotionally manageable. It adds massive credibility to your ethos. Careful listening and acknowledgement communicates (implicitly) that this is a rhetorical situation, that you’re open to hearing an argument and being persuaded.

You can accomplish quite a bit with body language. That is, simply standing alert and looking your opponent in the eye. But the most important element is to nod when your opponent makes points. Nodding is a passive sign of agreement, but it won’t be construed as agreement with the argument itself, only as agreement with the situation. It demonstrates that communication is proceeding smoothly. Once you start doing it, you’ll see how much it helps.

To clarify, what you’re agreeing on is not anything specific, but that the argument is continuing to your mutual satisfaction (even if you’re winning (or losing)). It’s a corollary to honesty, in my opinion, but this minor concession can go a long way to keeping an argument cool and productive.

Concede Small, Win Big

If you want to guarantee some victory in an argument, concede something. Anything. Sounds counterintuitive, I know, but any salesman will tell you that it works. Ideally you want to make the smallest concession with the biggest impact. To do so look for points that you consider inconsequential that your opponent seems to over-emphasize.

By surrendering a small piece of the argument, you accomplish three things:
1. You confirm to your opponent that you’re honest and open to persuasion.

2. Your opponent will feel obligated to reciprocate. And the return concession will likely be greater than yours—a tried and true sales technique.

3. You acknowledge to yourself that your ultimate goal is more important that “beating” your opponent into submission on every point. This breaks down a stubborn psychological barrier for many rhetors.

I’m not advocating that you concede a point dishonestly. That is, don’t agree to something you disagree with. Ideally you would find something in your opponent’s argument that you hadn’t considered. Or you might hear a point that you agree with independent of the current argument.

**Yes AND: Learn From Improv**

Anyone familiar with improv comedy knows that the quickest way to kill a scene is the word “no.” In rhetoric, too, a fast way to kill the argument and inflame emotions is to continually say negative things to your opponent. Not many people like to be told “no”—especially in a debate.

But why do we have to use the word at all? Of course you should acknowledge if you disagree with something, but avoid the word “no.” In fact, replace it with “yes.”

“Yes” is the verbal equivalent of a head nod. It’s a type of agreement but not necessarily with the point at hand. When your opponent makes a point that you strongly disagree with, follow it with, “Yes, and….” Then make your point. (Another helpful improv phrase is, “Not only that, but also….”)

You might be surprised how cordial your opponent will become when you use this technique, a favorite of improv artists around the world. It keeps the conversation flowing, helps you emit an amicable aura, and keeps tension down by perpetuating a positive mood. Why, yes, it’s one of my favorite rhetorical tactics.

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Agreeing and conceding in a debate is a difficult habit to form, but it’s one worth forming. I challenge you to see how much you can concede or how many times you can say “yes, and” in your next argument. It could be the difference between getting what you want and getting a headache. Not only that, but you’ll also be a better rhetor.

Happy persuading!