

A Communications Service

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In more than 30 years of defending free-market principles against those who distrust them, I've noticed how seldom either side seems to reach out to the other. The vast majority of debates resemble, in various degrees, those on CNN's Crossfire, where the debaters' purpose is almost always to "get" the other side, rather than to persuade.

People on my side of the debate are not noticeably more adept at persuasion than their opponents. On the assumption that many libertarians and conservatives would like to persuade those with whom they disagree, I have some suggestions, which I'd like to illustrate with an example: a disagreement between T.J. Rodgers, CEO of Cypress Semiconductor, and Sister Doris Gormley, a Catholic nun with the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia.

Nun of That

In a short form letter to Mr. Rodgers two years ago, Sister Doris stated that any company in which her order owned shares would be better run if it had a more racially and gender-diverse board, and that she had voted those shares accordingly. Mr. Rodgers, an advocate of free markets, replied with a six-page letter--distributed to Cypress shareholders--full of moral outrage. He did a good job of justifying the kind of people he chooses for his board. However, when he strayed from what he knew into speculation about what Sister Doris thought, Mr. Rodgers blew it.

When you are trying to persuade someone, everything matters--every word, every nuance. Mr. Rodgers could have written a letter that was consistent with his own principles and, at the same time, invited the nun to reconsider her views. But he didn't. Here are some passages from his letter.

Start with his sarcastic first sentence: "Thank you for your letter criticizing the lack of racial and gender diversity of Cypress's Board of Directors." I would substitute a simple "Thank you for your letter." Notice the difference. The matter-of-fact tone of my version prevents Sister Doris from raising her defenses immediately.

Consider also Mr. Rodgers's "a final point with which you will undoubtedly disagree" (actually only midway through the letter). If Sister Doris would undoubtedly disagree with it, there's no reason for him to make the point, other than to work through his distress. Mr. Rodgers himself seems to recognize this near the end of the letter. He draws a distinction between the right of the Sisters of St. Francis to make a free choice about how to invest their money and attempts by politicians to dictate how managers run their corporations--which, he says, is "what really worries me." But if that's what really worries him, why mention it in a letter to Sister Doris? In my view, and I'm sure in Mr. Rodgers's as well, Sister Doris is not responsible for what those politicians do. My rewrite: "A final point, and I ask that you keep an open mind about this..."

In a last example, Mr. Rodgers writes: "Finally, you ought to get down from your moral high horse. Your form letter signed by a stamped signature does not allow for the possibility that a CEO could run a company morally and disagree with your position." I've never seen a case where telling someone to get down from his or her high horse actually convinces the person do so. Instead, it has the perverse effect of making the person want to stay in the saddle. My edit is, "You and I both have strong views about what is moral. I believe that I am running Cypress morally, and that running it the way you suggest I would in fact be immoral. You might find this statement shocking, but let me explain."

Look Back at Anger

Do I think communication should never be angry? I do not. An example of someone who has shown anger appropriately is Ronald Reagan. When he stood at the Berlin Wall in 1987 and said, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall," he was effective because he had moral authority on his side against brute force on the other. Mr. Reagan also used anger effectively during the 1980 New Hampshire primary. Having paid the full cost of holding a debate, his campaign insisted that all the candidates be included, not just front-runner George Bush. When the others showed up and the newspaper running the debate refused to seat them, Mr. Reagan tried to explain the situation to the restless crowd. In response, a newspaper editor told the soundman, "Turn Mr. Reagan's microphone off"--to which Mr. Reagan replied angrily, "I am paying for this microphone, Mr. Green." That response was replayed many times during the campaign; in his memoirs,

Mr. Reagan writes, "I may have won the debate, the primary--and the nomination--right there."

So anger that's expressed appropriately has its place. But by launching an attack on Sister Doris based on the three short paragraphs of her letter, Mr. Rodgers came across as someone who saw a chance to vent and took it. His "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it any more" attitude just didn't fit the context. If you wish to defend freedom effectively, you must first hear those you are trying to reach.