



ADVOCATING A CONTROVERSIAL POSITION

Any leader or advocate who wants to effect change will sooner or later be faced with the need to persuade a skeptical audience of a controversial policy or program. We know from social psychology, from rhetorical studies, and from our own teaching and acting experience that most listeners respond with surprising openness to respectful attempts to address their innate fear of challenging the status quo. But some of these strategies are far from obvious. For example, recent studies have shown that an expectedly high percentage of citizens appreciate an admission of some ambivalence or uncertainty from their leaders—even when the speaker is proposing a controversial position.

Why is this? Because your audience wants to feel that they can play an important role in formulating policies that will affect them, and your uncertainty leaves room for their opinions. No one trusts the guy who insists he has all the answers—at least not any longer. Since public figures have a special responsibility to engage their constituencies, they need to create the conditions for dialogue, not monologue. To do this, you have to see your audience not as potential adversaries, but as colleagues in an exciting enterprise. Perhaps you remember a story about baseball's great Ted Williams, who trained himself to see the pitcher as his partner in the quest for the perfect hit. By framing his challenge as a dynamic duet, he transformed a potential enemy into his most valued supporter. Here are some concrete suggestions:

- *Pick one or two themes, state them early on, and weave them through your speech*
- *Take the risk of personalizing your position: give us a sense of who you are and how you got here*
- *Think hard about the concerns of your various constituents, and try to address each group directly in the course of your speech*
- *Don't be afraid to take tough stands, but show respect for the other side*
- *Pre-empt objections to your positions by addressing the obvious counterarguments*
- *Squeeze in specific examples whenever possible to illustrate your main points*
- *Always be lively and conversational rather than dry and textbook-perfect*
- *Try hard to avoid clichés and the usual bureaucratic jargon*
- *Consider using dramatic repetition to drive home your key points*
- *Avoid lists longer than three or four items*
- *Be confident, but admit that you don't have all the answers*
- *Ask your audience for their help: be specific about what you need from them*