

Inoculation: Defend Against the Attack

During the Korean War, Americans were shocked at the number of captured soldiers who willingly cooperated with the enemy. It was first wondered if they had been tortured and beaten into submission. Investigation revealed that the soldiers had not been tortured, but rather that they had been subjected to brainwashing sessions with a skillful questioner. Soldiers were questioned about American ideologies such as freedom, democracy, and equality. Surprisingly, many of the soldiers had great difficulty defending their beliefs. The captors persisted in attacking beliefs the soldiers couldn't explain until the soldiers began to question and doubt the validity of those beliefs. If the captors could get the soldiers that far, getting them to commit treason became much easier. New soldiers from that point on began receiving more extensive political training in addition to the typical military instruction. No soldier would ever again hold naive beliefs or be unable to defend America verbally or militarily.

How did the military train their soldiers to withstand the potential verbal attacks as had been perpetrated against them in the Korean War? What would keep them strong in the face of such adversity, preventing them from crumbling? It is a method called "inoculation." The term "inoculation" comes from the medical field: Injecting a weak dose of a virus into a patient inoculates or prevents the patient from actually getting the disease. The body's immune system fights off this weak form of the disease and is prepared when the full disease attacks. Likewise, when you are presenting to an audience who has an opposing viewpoint standing in the wing, you have to "inoculate" them with a weakened form of their argument. If you know someone is going to attack your viewpoint, you prepare your audience in advance for the attack.

The idea is to address the issues that your opponent will bring up and then directly refute them. The point to understand is that the inoculation must be a weak form of the "virus." If you inoculated a human body with the strong strain of a disease, they could become sick or even die. The dose must be weak enough to prepare the body for the stronger virus but not so strong that it overpowers the body. In persuasion, you don't want to give strong doses. You don't want to give your prospects all the ammunition from the other side of the persuasive message. On the other hand, if you don't prepare your audience for what they are about to hear, the sting of your opponent's words, logic, or testimony might be too much for them to handle and they could switch sides.

We are surrounded by countless examples of inoculation, many of which can be seen used in the courtroom. The attorney stands up and says, "The prosecution will call my client mean, evil, a terrible husband, and a poor member of society, but this is not true, as I will show you over the next couple of weeks...." So, when the prosecution stands up and states anything close to what the defense attorney has claimed they will, the jury is prepared, thinking he is acting exactly the way the defense said he would. This gives the jurors a way to ignore or even discount the prosecutor's arguments.

Street gangs also use this inoculation tool. When they are attempting to convert someone to their beliefs and to join the gang, they will inoculate and prepare the future gang member by telling him his parents, teachers, and cops will encourage him not to join a

gang. They will tell him all the reasons his opponents will give, fueling him with ammunition for the impending attack. This preparation enables him to handle the oncoming assault from parents, teachers, etc. Society needs to understand the importance of inoculation in regards to smoking, drugs, teenage pregnancy, and others issues we know our children will come in contact with. Who should be the first contact with your children – you or the drug dealer? When you inoculate, people can mentally prepare arguments supporting their stance. This reinforcement prevents them from switching teams. The more prepared they are, the more they'll hold fast to their attitudes and beliefs. The more deeply this reinforcement is ingrained, the more difficult it will become for them to be swayed.

When do you use inoculation? The correct answer depends on the composition and attitude of your audience. If they already agree with your position, you only need to present one side. If they disagree with you, you need to present both sides. If an opposing speaker is going to follow you, you definitely need to inoculate. Giving both sides of the argument works better with audience members who already know something about the opposition's strength. Inoculation works better with knowledgeable prospects because they communicate respect for your opponent's intelligence. If the audience is full of committed believers, you win points by acknowledging there is another position.

Inoculation increases your credibility and your ability to persuade. By presenting them with the other side of the argument, you show the audience that you know how they feel and think. You are not afraid of the truth and have done your research. You prepare your audience in advance about the negative things someone could say about you or your product. There is great respect and power when you answer someone's questions before they even ask them. When you know your audience, not only can you prepare for pending attacks, but you can also answer questions with inoculation. This gives your listeners a solution in their minds. Imagine persuading a prospect about the need to use your product. You know the competition will call your product the most expensive product on the market. You know this so you inoculate. You tell your prospects upfront that this is the highest quality, longest lasting, most expensive product on the market. You let him know why you are the best and the most expensive. Your product has won most of the industry's awards, lasts the longest, and gives the most for what they pay for. These arguments, strategically planted in the mind of your prospect, will enable him to access these facts when the competition belittles you or your product.

Effective Inoculation

It is important to understand that with inoculation you first have to warn your prospects with a weak attack before you offer the defense. The warning must let them know that an attack is coming. This gets them thinking. After the initial attack, there should be a delay between the warning and the impending attack. This will cause more thinking and allow the defense to sink in. Then when the attack finally comes, it must only challenge the audience – not overwhelm them. You don't want to raise doubt, spur more objections, or cause them to take the other side, which is why you shouldn't overwhelm them.

Consider the following two examples: If someone tells you he has a great joke that he “just *knows*” is going to make you split your sides laughing, what is the tendency? The natural tendency is to think, okay, is this really going to be *that* funny? It’s just an immediate, natural, almost subconscious reaction. Why? We often resist persuasion because we don’t like to be told *how* we’re going to react or respond. We want to be free to laugh, or not laugh, without it being imposed.

Here’s the second example: In a 1986 study, an experimenter told a group of people that they were going to hear a message intended to make them afraid and, as a result of their fear, change their minds about a particular issue. Another group was also set up to receive the same message, but they were not forewarned as the first group was. The message was presented to each group, attempting to persuade them to be tested for syphilis. The results clearly demonstrated that the group that had been warned (inoculated) showed greater resistance, and therefore a lesser degree of persuasion, than the unwarned (*not* inoculated) group.

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