

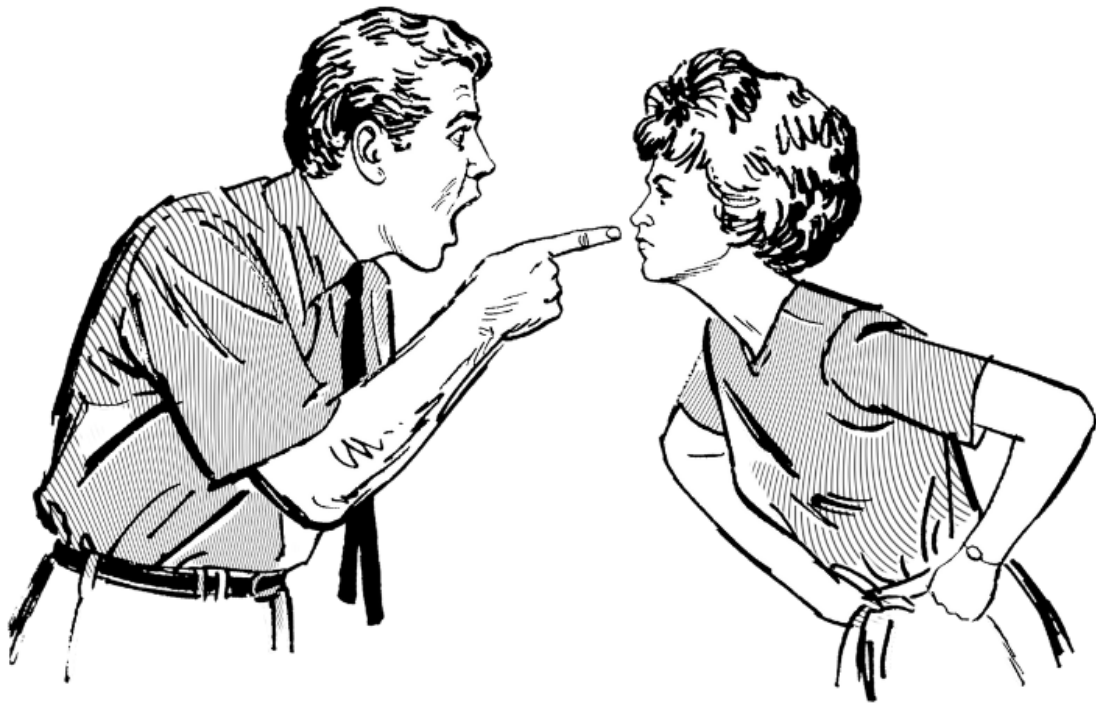
Overcoming the **Backfire** **Effect**



HOW YOU CAN CHANGE
PEOPLE'S MINDS WHEN
FACTS MAKE THINGS WORSE

By Duane Lester

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The Backfire Effect

If you are presented with data that challenged a position you've held for years, do you think you'd be likely to question your position, or would you dismiss the information? Many say they are open-minded and would welcome information that would help them come to better conclusions. However, multiple studies show that many might actually find themselves rejecting the new information. Not only that, but their support for their original position is actually strengthened despite the new evidence. This is called "The Backfire Effect."¹

This is one of the reasons people cling to their political positions, even though you've shown the proof positive that their position is wrong, or harmful. There is no amount of evidence you can link to in your Facebook comment to change their mind. In fact, you may be doing the opposite. You may cause them to dig in deeper.

So what should you do to change a person's mind?

Get them to argue with themselves.

Questions are the Answer

One of my mentors is Bob Pike, a training legend. One of the things Bob taught me is, "People don't argue with their own data." While I've never heard Bob talk about The Backfire Effect, he's understood its power for decades. "Rather than tell people information," he says, "try to get them to discover it for themselves."

And to do this, I use questions to get people to argue with themselves. Let me give you an example. I found myself walking onto the campus of George Mason University once to teach a lesson on criminal justice reform. As I entered the building where I was scheduled to teach, I looked up at the large silver letters on the wall. “The Antonin Scalia Law School.”

How was I, someone with no law background and a degree in Commercial Horticulture, going to convince a room full of College Republicans to move away from their “tough on crime” positions and listen to a lecture on needed changes in criminal justice? I had little credibility here, I thought. What could I do?

I remembered one of the most important lessons taught to me by the economist Milton Friedman. In one of his books or speeches, I remember Friedman saying, “One of the great mistakes is to judge policies and programs by their intentions rather than their results.”² With that in my mind, I began the presentation.

“I’d like to start this presentation with a quick show of hands,” I said. “Please put your hand in the air if you think that violent felons should have their Second Amendment rights revoked for life, even after they have served their time and been released from prison?”

As I expected, hands went up around the room.

“Okay, good,” I said. “Now, keep your hand in the air if you think gun control works.”

A few hands slowly started down and nervous chuckling came from different parts of the classroom. I could tell then that they were dealing with their own cognitive dissonance. See, in the answer to the first question, they were advocating in favor of gun control. However, when they answered the second question, they were admitting their previous position would not work. They then began arguing with themselves, and I felt were more open to my next statement.

“While you consider your answers, I’d like you to consider this also. When we violate the Second Amendment rights of even violent felons, what are we really doing? Remember what Milton Friedman, one of President Ronald Reagan’s economic advisors, said, that we shouldn’t just focus on what a policy promises, but on what it produces. This policy promises that society will be safer because violent felons won’t have access to guns because it’s against the law. But has there ever been a time when a violent felon said, ‘Sorry, everyone. I can’t rob that bank with you because I can’t carry a gun.’ I doubt it. The fact is, if a violent felon wants a gun, they’ll get one. So what has the policy actually produced?”

The class looked at me. No one answered.

“It appears the only people we are really disarming here are the formerly incarcerated violent felon who doesn’t want to go back to prison. In other words, we’re violating the right to bear arms of now law-abiding citizens. In other words, people who pose no threat to you or society.”

The class sat quietly.

“If this is true about one policy, does it make sense that other policies could also be producing results that are different than what they promised?”

Several in the class nodded.

“Then perhaps we should explore some changes that might be needed.”

My Process

What you read there isn't as important as what you didn't read. You didn't read about how I told them they were wrong. Once they realized the contradiction in their own opinions, they began to question their own position. If I had said, “How many of you think this? Well, that's wrong and here's why,” they would have closed off immediately, because they would want to protect themselves.

Instead, the first thing I did was ***accept their premise***. I didn't judge it. I didn't argue with it. I just moved on to my next question. Then who was arguing?

They were. And who were they arguing with?

Themselves. And since people don't argue with their own data, they felt a need to get this straightened out.

The Heart and “Sowell” of the Process

There are a few lessons from Dr. Thomas Sowell I keep in mind with having these conversations. First is what I feel is the most important lesson I’ve learned from him.

There are no solutions. There are only trade-offs.³

It’s important to note another point that I believe Sowell’s position on trade-offs is based, or at least finds itself aligned with. This one comes from Frederic Bastiat, a French economist and brilliant writer. In his essay, “That Which is Seen, and That Which is Not Seen,”⁴ he wrote:

In the department of economy, an act, a habit, an institution, a law, gives birth not only to an effect, but to a series of effects. Of these effects, the first only is immediate; it manifests itself simultaneously with its cause — it is seen. The others unfold in succession — they are not seen: it is well for us, if they are foreseen.

We often do not see the trade-offs. We see politicians standing with people in hard hats and applaud the new jobs or new bridge. We don’t see the jobs that are never created or the businesses never built. We might see that, but often, the person you’ve argued with in the past feels passionate about the solution they hold or promote. That passion can blind them to the fact that there is no solution. All we have are different sets of trade-offs, and it’s up to you to select the best set.

Questions are *Still* the Answer

Sowell also says there are three questions⁵ to ask when confronted with a top-down solution. They are:

1. Compared to what?
2. At what cost?
3. What hard evidence do you have?

I spent some time a few years back delivering a presentation across America in defense of free-trade. Many of the participants in the classes were not supporters of the policy and felt tariffs were a great way to protect American workers.

Keeping those questions in mind, along with the fact there were no solutions, only trade-offs, and being mindful of Bastiat's words, I would reply to protectionist positions with questions.

I remember one instance where a participant claimed steel tariffs were needed to protect steel workers.

"At what cost?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" they replied.

“Well, there are no solutions. There are only trade-offs, and we need to pick the best set of trade-offs for all American workers. So what is the cost of tariffs on steel? We might save a few jobs in the steel industry, but for every one person working in steel manufacturing, there are an estimated sixty-five people working in steel consumption. Also, the last time we put tariffs on steel, during the Bush administration, we actually lost more jobs in areas that used steel than there were in all of steel manufacturing. We lost close to 200,000 jobs and there were only 187,000 jobs in steel manufacturing. So again, I just want to know if the cost of protecting those jobs is worth it. Do you think steel workers are more important than construction workers?”

My goal with that answer was to get them to reconcile their cognitive dissonance. They want tariffs to protect the American worker, but by putting tariffs in place, they are actually harming the American worker. They have to square that with themselves.

I'd be lying if I said every presentation ended with a room full of free-traders, but my goal wasn't to transform everyone by the end of the class. My goal was to begin the transformation by making them examine their own data, their own principles and beliefs.

What if...

The final tactic I've used again relies breaking people out of their usual way of thinking about things. One of the biggest limiting paradigms I've seen while training, and I've seen this in people from the left and the right, is the idea that if government doesn't do it, it won't get done. In fact, the only people I haven't seen express this idea are my anarchist friends. (After all, they don't think government should even exist.) So to overcome this, I ask, "What if government didn't do that?"

I was training in Carmel, Indiana, when I believe I first asked this question to a class. I was trying to get them to recognize that other Key Institutions⁶ could solve problems we were asking government to solve. I wanted them to look to the institutions of Business, Community, and Education, not just Government. So I asked the following question.

"What would happen if tomorrow the governor called a press conference and announced that, effective immediately, he was closing all the public schools and redirecting all funds for education into other areas of government. Effective immediately, all teachers and school staff are terminated and not one more penny would be spent on education. It was not their responsibility anymore. Would parents across Indiana simply shrug and say, 'Huh. I guess my kids are going to be stupid,' or would they come up with other solutions? What if government didn't do education? What would happen then?"

With this new perspective, the class began listing one idea after another of how education could be handled by parents, churches, or small groups like pods. They generated other creative solutions, some of which we saw become reality during the pandemic when public schools were closed.

Asking, “What if government didn’t do that?” is a great way to get someone to imagine different solutions and get outside of the dominant paradigm that government should do it. In many instances, not only shouldn’t they do it, but they’re actually making things worse. Remember, there are no solutions. There are only trade-offs. And government solutions often come with some pretty awful trade-offs.

When you ask this question, you’re giving them the opportunity to discover what you already know. And this discovery will carry more weight with them because people don’t argue with their own data.

It Takes Time

Just like I didn't expect to turn protectionists into free traders in one lecture, you shouldn't expect to turn people away from their closely held beliefs in one conversation. I can take a long time. Years, sometimes.

The main thing to remember are these key points:

- **People don't argue with their own data.**
- **Accept their premise. Then make them argue with themselves over it.**
- **There are no solutions. There are only trade-offs.**
- **Questions are the answer.**
- **What people discover for themselves, they value and believe more.**

Rather than triggering the backfire effect by telling people what you want them to know, accept their premise, ask the right questions, and let them discover it for themselves.

When you do this, you'll become a better listener, a more informed person, and a more influential individual.

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A C A D E M Y SM

Since 2015, Grassroots Leadership Academy has inspired citizens to be bold leaders who improve their communities and break barriers standing in the way of people realizing their potential.

We offer free, in-person trainings and educational programming to people across the U.S. and empower people to elevate themselves into positions where change is at their fingertips.

Our training programs educate concerned citizens about the issues facing their communities and equip them with the skills they need to remove barriers to opportunity in their communities.

Our goal is to move society toward one of mutual benefit, where people succeed by helping others improve their lives.

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American for Prosperity activists engage friends and neighbors on key issues and encourage them to take an active role in advancing a free and open society, where every person can realize their American dream. We recruit and unite concerned individuals in all 50 states to advance policies that will help people improve their lives.



About the Author

For almost 15 years, Duane Lester has been an outspoken proponent of individual liberty, limited government, and the principles of a free society. In 2007, he began as a grassroots activist by launching his website All American Blogger. Leveraging the communication skills learned while serving in the United States Navy as a Journalist, his writing earned him additional writing opportunities at some of the more popular center-right websites. Five years later, he was awarded the first Breitbart Blogger Award from the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity and The Heritage Foundation. Building on that success, he launched The Missouri Torch, focusing on the political landscape in his home state. It wasn't long before it was one of the most influential outlets in Missouri politics. In 2015,

Duane joined the Grassroots Leadership Academy (GLA), a project of the Americans for Prosperity Foundation, as a Grassroots Trainer. Since then, he has created and delivered many of their more popular presentations, including, "Making the Moral Case for Capitalism" and "How to Sell Freedom Without Starting a Fight." He recently became a Certified Professional in Talent Development by the Association for Talent Development, a globally recognized organization for learning professionals.

Duane is currently the Director of Issue Education for GLA. He lives in Missouri with his wife and nine children (you read that right) and is probably reading a book right now.