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Reducing The Fears And Inhibitions Concerning Personal Advocacy

It would be hard to imagine an advocacy context in which the prospect of having to advocate for something or someone would not cause most people to hesitate somewhat before acting. This hesitation derives from a quite reasonable appreciation that there could well be costs and consequences involved in speaking up and advantages to be had by not doing so. A good deal of advocacy decision-making must necessarily revolve around the calculation of risks and gains to be had by acting as an advocate. A thoroughgoing rationalist would simply tally up the pros and cons and act based upon where the advantages lay. Most of us, though, are not quite this type as we are apt to be motivated by factors other than just the logic of preponderance. For instance, many of us are just as likely to be influenced by fear, desperation, passion, hope, outrage, despair and inspiration amongst other things. We are just as likely to be wimpy as strong even when logic favors us if we are uncomfortable with conflict. The reality is that advocacy can never be understood to be just about balancing pros and cons as long as ordinary people are the ones that are doing it

Advocacy is a human undertaking and there is much to be gained by leaving the humanity of people in the equation. While there is, indeed, an element of calculation that should usefully be brought into how to pursue an advocacy agenda it cannot be allowed to overshadow the fundamental fact that it is the character of people themselves that advocacy rests on. When they are weak so will be their advocacy and when they are strong the

reverse will normally be true. The quality of advocacy naturally flows from the capacity of those involved to do what is asked of them. If people are inexperienced then one could well expect a novice-like performance. Similarly, if they have successfully faced and managed many fractious and divisive incidents in the past they can be expected to show a measure of calm and balance in the face of new provocations. We humans are not such a fixed commodity that we are beyond influence. In fact, we are very capable of altering our performance on advocacy for the better if we are properly prepared and supported in the process. This is so irrespective of

the fact that we all bring considerable variation to the table as to our natural and supplemented endowments vis a vis the advocacy role.

There are many dimensions of what would ultimately be considered a successful exercise in advocacy that derives from the qualities of those doing the advocacy. These could include traits such as their values and goals, their degree of resolve, the extent to which they need to be supported or liked by others and so forth. It is very worthwhile to recognize the value that could come from preparing people for what advocacy would demand of them. This would be particularly useful if done well enough in advances. While learning can and does occur as events unfold it is, nonetheless, very hard to do in the midst of events. It is not true that all people are going to be good students of advocacy. Nor should there be the assumption that preparation assures success. There could, however, be a reasonable conviction that facing and surmounting the wide variety of fears and hesitations of engaging in advocacy would be helped by forthrightly anticipating them and rehearsing one's response to them.

It would appear that there might be a variety of useful forms of both initial and ongoing preparation that could be explored as possible supports to both novice and veteran advocates.

These could include any or all of the following;

- 1) Orienting the person to the reality of the possible personal trials and tribulations that can come with taking on an advocacy mission. Being surprised or even shocked by what advocacy might one day require of you certainly is not helpful for the purposes of readying oneself to do hard things. It is quite likely that the demonstration of ineffective advocacy may stem from the fact that the potential advocates are unable to function properly in the face of the actual difficulties. Such a proposed orientation would allow the serious advocate to both recognize what advocacy could cost them and to resolve to pay this price.
- 2) An exploration with the person the elements of their own temperament or personality, which they might anticipate as being areas where they are particularly vulnerable in acting as an advocate. Not everyone is aware of these in advance and new vulnerabilities might unexpectedly appear. Even so, it is a good safeguard to evaluate for oneself the points of weakness that might need strengthening as one faces an advocacy challenge. These may be as varied as discomfort with conflict, a short temper, a tendency to speak without thinking, difficulty confronting people one

knows well, fear of reprisal, confusion as to loyalties, fear of being disliked or hated and so on. No matter what the issue a degree of preliminary buttressing of oneself will usually be helpful.

- 3) Ensure that the person gain some practice with the particular advocacy challenges they need to face. While it is not easy to practice it does tend to have the effect of readying people. If one has never spoken against an

authority before it can be quite intimidating. What most who have mastered their anxieties about this will tell you is that one can indeed get the hang of it but only if one stays with it. Errors, of course, are the humbling part of practice but it is unlikely that one can improve without first making a lot of mistakes.

- 4) Link the person to other more experienced advocates. It has long been the case that, if you want to get better at something find someone better at it to encourage, advise and educate you. Advocacy is difficult enough to do so that doing it alone and without support makes it even more likely that many won't stick with it or do as well as they might otherwise. The conduct of advocacy is a task which readily lends itself to mentoring, the sharing of experiences and information and the offering of support. People are not machines and having people in your corner is a great advantage. This is even moreso going into circumstances that one dreads.
- 5) Take the time to sort out the values, priorities and principles that are going to guide one's advocacy. It is very difficult to think about these things once the action has begun. There may well be serious consequences for being confused about them as one comes into negotiations or conflicts with others that are much clearer. Knowing what are your "bottom lines" in advance of a situation will be very enabling as one makes decisions regarding goals, alliances, tactics and trade-offs. The formation of these bottom lines is much easier done when unhurried and with the solitude necessary to search ones heart and soul.

6) Spend time prior to action in anticipating what those being advocated against might possibly do and try to spell out that which which would be most fearful if done. Fears are natural but that doesn't make them predictive in the real world. Letting one's fears inordinately override good sense is common enough but it isn't going to lead to good advocacy. On the other hand the attempt to name and sensibly address one's fears is going to be helpful. This is even moreso as one develops a habit of weighing rather than just having fears.

7) It is a widely reported observation that most people stand up better on most things that you can measure if they are getting social support. It is very important that the potential advocate have a number of occasions to explore the ways in which they need personal support in both their advocacy role but as well, in their wider lives. Advocates who try to function as 'islands', not needful of support, will inevitably discover otherwise. The wiser course is to be as realistic as one can about seeing one's need for support, asking for it, and recognizing how much this can change. The type of support will vary as needed but the value of taking the responsibility for providing for it will always be helpful.

8) It is important in advocacy, as in many other things, to learn to recognize that the measure of quality is not always in winning. Many good advocates will lose, as this may be all that is feasible at a point of time. The advocacy involved may have been sterling or even weak but the outcome of failure might have prevailed in any case. Thus, there needs to be other personal measures of performance that take account of what might be thought of as the objective difficulty of the advocacy action or

objective. Otherwise, there will be no taking into account of what is really involved in advocacy...including discouraging defeats and setbacks even when one has done as well as one can.

9) Compassion for oneself and others is a great mercy because it allows the possibility of balance, forgiveness and the capacity to see reality through the eyes of others. It may seem strange to have compassion for those one opposes yet this permits a kind of connection to them and their experience that avoids their dehumanization. It also leads to better advocacy because it encourages one to take responsibility to understand the other and thus act in a more informed way. Compassion for oneself, similarly leads to more insight into one's ways and can permit the necessary

rebuilding of one's efforts both after one's own errors and the inevitable setbacks of advocacy. This is why taking up the question of compassion is so useful over the long run as a recurring question in advocacy preparation and practice.

- 10) It is very common that after a particularly trying advocacy encounter people will invariably seek some way to debrief and decompress from the experience. What can make these moments quite useful, both emotionally and from a learning point of view, is if they are seized upon as a chance to not only savour the lessons of what went well but to also begin to probe what didn't for its instructive value. There may be affirmation to be gained even when a lot of things went less well than hoped. Such recognition builds confidence for future encounters as well as provides a chance to enjoy the things that did work out.

The important point is to not treat inhibition and fear of the trials of advocacy as a kind of fixed immovable reality. There is so much that can be done to modify how we adjust to these all too human parts of the experience of advocacy if we see it as a personal development matter rather than as a "fixed for all time" kind of thing.

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