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Snippet #149 Debate Strategy

Contrary to popular belief, the most important right of membership is not the right to vote, but the right to debate. Through your debate on an issue you can influence others to think the same way as you.

Skillfully using your right to debate can greatly influence the outcome of a decision. Clumsy debate can also influence the rest of the group – but in a negative way. At such times the message can be obscured by the messenger. Some people are more task or fact oriented; they see things from the point of view of data and other objective criteria. Others approach issues from a more person or people oriented perspective; they measure options by their more subjective impact on people. For example, if the question is whether to increase dues or fees, task oriented people are more likely to see the issue in terms of the budget and the bottom line, whereas those who are more people oriented will be concerned about its impact on members. Knowing how the rest approach issues is critical to being heard and understood by all.

What do you think the priorities should be when making this decision? Assess how much you are being influenced by your own preferences rather than the strategic plan. How does this decision fit with the short and long term strategies of the organization? What key points can you make that highlight them?

Who usually disagrees with you? Is it because of perspective or personality? If it's perspective, how does that person (or persons) differ in perspective? Can you show how your approach also meets their needs? If the issue is personality, can you modulate your approach a bit to make it more likely you'll be heard? Can you communicate on their level? For example, someone who is very direct doesn't want to listen to tangential stories, but someone who is more easy going may see directness as rudeness.

Suggestions for Debate

- Think about what you want to say before seeking the floor.
- Make brief notes with no more than three key points you want to make. That way you won't forget what you want to say.
- Prioritize your three remarks so that you make key points early, when you have their attention.
- To help others see your point of view, be clear about what you think is important.
- Avoid acronyms and technical jargon when speaking—seek to have everyone understand you.
- Pick your battles—don't speak on every issue before the group.
- Finish by asking members to support your position, and don't forget to count your votes.
- Don't take more than your allotted time.

If you agree with the motion:

- Show other members how the motion meets their needs.
- Debate a positive point that others may not have seen.
- Remember that it may be better not to speak at all if you have nothing new to add.

If you disagree with the motion:

- Show how the proposal is not the best course of action, does not have evidence to support it, does not solve the problem, or is impractical.
- Concede points that are not important and show how your position is better on balance.
- Move that the motion be referred to a committee and try to get the committee to address your concerns and recommend modifications.
- Move that the motion be postponed to the next meeting so that you can have more time to gather support for your position.
- Pick your battles—don't become known as someone who is always complaining.