

Gary Houser: Just to start with, Melanie, how about a brief background and a quick bio on yourself.

Melanie Sturm: Well, I grew up in Omaha, Nebraska, and was always politically inclined since my parents were as well. I loved American history and have always been inspired by our amazing heritage. I went away to college in Boston and was in the minority there as a conservative. I studied International Relations and Economics, and while at Tufts University, I started a student newspaper that offered an alternative viewpoint – a conservative viewpoint – as a journal of opinion, which sharpened my writing and political analysis skills. After college, I worked in investment banking in both New York and London, got my MBA at INSEAD in Fontainebleau, France, and came back to the states to work for a part of the World Bank called International Finance Corporation. IFC works with the private sector in the developing world to promote economic growth. I specialized first in Latin America, and then Oil & Gas. I enjoyed the travel and the challenge but eventually grew weary living in Washington, DC and working in a big institution.

Shortly after moving to Aspen, Colorado, I met and married my husband and had our son Zane. I became involved in the community and local politics leading to becoming vice-chair of Pitkin County Republicans in 2009. Before the 2010 mid-terms, I led a point-counterpoint editorial effort on the Aspen Times opinion page with the Democrats. Shortly after, the editor of the Aspen Times invited me to, as he put it, "help him diversify the opinion page." And I always joke it's not because he needed a woman or a Jew. I didn't want to just parrot Republican talking points, and mostly, I didn't want to be the scourge of Aspen. So, I called my column, "Think Again, You Might Change Your Mind." My goal was to expose readers to unconsidered facts and arguments because the essence of a free and fair society is an informed and thoughtful citizenry. As Thomas Jefferson said, when the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government. But I felt people weren't well-informed, so the government couldn't be trusted. Anyway, I quickly learned that if I wanted to be read by people inclined to disagree with me, I needed a different, more readable approach, just

as conservatives need a more hearable approach to get our messages across. In the process, I realized there's a big difference between merely expressing your opinion and actually persuading someone, which involves first earning their trust so they will entertain your ideas.

Gary: So that's great. First, what led you to imagine and start your business to train people using your techniques?

Melanie: Right, so when I started writing my column, I was really concerned about being "the conservative that everyone hated" -- and I also wanted to be *read* if I was going to put the effort in. And I also believed, as Margaret Thatcher said, "first you win the argument, then you win the vote," or support. And what I realized pretty quickly is, it's not enough to have the facts and good arguments on your side, because they can cause the "backfire effect." People will just dig in and find disconfirming facts to undermine your argument until there's a stand-off. So first I had to win the trust of the people that I wanted to read my column, and then once I'd earned their trust, then I could lead them on this journey to the common ground they instinctively share. And that's what I mean when I say there's a difference between persuasion and opinion.

To hone my persuasive communication skills, I read Dale Carnegie, "How to Win Friends and Influence People," and Stephen Covey, "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People," "Start with Why" by Simon Sinek – they're the masters of effective communication. I also engaged with my readers, learning how to bring them to common ground. Not only did I become the most popular Aspen Times columnist, with a national readership thanks to social media, but to my dismay, I realized that I wasn't perceived as ideological. And that's when I started to identify and itemize what I was doing. These insights are now at the core of my Six Powers of Persuasion which are all about bringing people to common ground by communicating in ways that resonate with them.

At that point, I reached out to John Andrews who was then head of Centennial Institute, and we formed a group to launch what we called "Conservative Persuasion Bootcamp." I later changed the name to "Engage to Win" to reflect

my “why,” which is about winning people over to the common ground they instinctively share, they just didn't know it until you brought them there. And if we can do that, we will not only win elections, we'll win a better future for Americans.

I discovered in writing my column that one of the ways to bring people to common ground is to fight for people, not for or against things – and especially not against people. That's Power of Persuasion #3. Recently, I saw a quote by Thomas Sowell which resonated with me. It's a quote more about socialism but I think it's about any bad statist idea. He said, "The best argument for socialism is that it sounds so good. The best argument against it is that it doesn't work."

And so, one of the things I always try to do in crafting a persuasive argument against a bad idea, is to show how it doesn't work, how it hurts people and isn't fair or compassionate. And then for good ideas, I show how it works and is fair and compassionate and helps people. That's a very simple template to follow.

Then, to underscore this insight about fighting for people and making fair and care arguments, was Arthur Brooks -- former President of the American Enterprise Institute – who did a lecture at one of our first workshops in which he introduced Jonathan Haidt and his Moral Foundation Theory. The theory informs my Power of Persuasion # 4 – we can reach everyone with a fairness and compassion appeal.

In a nutshell, the theory posits that there are five moral foundations, or prisms through which people see the world and look at policy. Conservatives care about all five, but liberals are off the charts with two – *compassion and fairness*.

And so, we can reach everyone from across the “political/moral spectrum” when we frame our arguments in compassion and fairness. You can still appeal to conservatives with the other three -- *authority, loyalty, and purity* -- but you're only speaking to “the choir.” That works in primaries, but when you're trying to win over persuadables and power down hostiles, best to make a fairness and compassion-framed argument. After becoming acquainted with Haidt's theory, I realized I was actually doing that instinctively, and it was working. Now I follow

Haidt closely and his most recent book, "The Coddling of the American Mind," is a must read as it explains our current era and especially the chaos on campuses.

Now, not only do I do my persuasion training with grassroots, empowering activists to use their voices persuasively and winsomely to have maximum impact, but I also coach and craft persuasive messaging for conservatives of all stripes, including elected officials, candidates for office and movement leaders. Over the last couple years, I've carved out a specialty in education/school board issues training conservatives how to oppose the incursion of controversial racial and gender ideologies into the school system.

Gary: Can you just remind us again of Jonathan Haidt's five principles.

Melanie: So Haidt's *Moral Foundation Theory* posits that there are prisms through which people see the world. I call them "moral tastebuds." *Compassion* and *fairness* are the two where the Venn Diagrams of *liberal* morality and *conservative* morality intersect. The other three prisms that appeal to conservatives are *authority*, *loyalty*, and *purity*.

Gary: Purity?

Melanie: Right. Let me explain, first with purity. It's only conservatives that cared when Miley Cyrus was twerking or when the movie "Cuties" came out on Netflix with little girls pole dancing. Liberals really didn't care. Regarding loyalty -- conservatives were annoyed when Barak Obama didn't wear a flag on his lapel in 2008, not so much liberals. Regarding authority, when the kids are crossing the border and breaking immigration laws, conservatives don't like that, while liberals want to find a home for those kids. Finally, the other important point is that in no place in the moral foundation Venn Diagram is money because money has no moral salience. Yet conservatives tend to make arguments about money. It's not that you can't, you just have to frame it in terms of fairness and compassion. So, for example, instead of railing against unsustainable entitlements (a thing), we can argue that it's unfair that young people paying into the system now won't get

their benefits when they retire. That's a money argument that fights for people and is framed as fairness and compassion.

Gary: That's very good. Thank you. Let me just move on with a couple of additional questions. How successful are you in training people. Do you have any metrics, or do you have a couple of anecdotes that you could share?

Melanie: I do. One of my earliest successes was when I got to work with Cathy McMorris Rodgers who in 2017 was the U.S. House of Representatives GOP Conference Chair. She was the #3 person in the caucus. At that point, the GOP conference was passing tax reform. She invited me to write some persuasive messaging on tax reform and train the caucus to use it. Through that process I got to know her and then to work with her campaign in the 2018 midterms when all Congressional Republicans were vulnerable to the claim that they did not support preexisting conditions because they'd passed many "repeal and replace" Obamacare bills that did not cover preexisting conditions. So, they were all vulnerable, including Cathy McMorris Rodgers, who was polling within the margin of error, though she'd always won be double digits. She, like all politicians who get elected speaking the way they speak, wanted to talk about what she's for rather than why she was for it. And so, she would talk about all the what's. "I sponsored this bill," or "the President supported this bill," and it was always "what," "what," "what," instead of why. And, as Simon Sinek teaches, starting with why is the best way to find common ground because people follow people who believe what they believe. That's why my Power of Persuasion #2 is to find common ground by articulating "Whys," which explain how the things you support help people.

And so, in her debate prep, we focused on how she could be less vulnerable to the question "Do you support preexisting conditions?" In the first debate, she disarmed her opponent with a response fueled by righteous indignation, and a powerful story (Power of Persuasion #5). Cathy said, "I take offense at the suggestion that I don't support preexisting conditions. My son was born with a preexisting condition. (He has Down Syndrome, as most people know.) And I

have fought my entire congressional career to assure that all Americans have access to high quality affordable healthcare, and right now they don't, and that's not fair." Her 30 seconds were up, and she put her opponent on her heels and then she won her election by 11 points.

Gary: So, you obviously having an impact.

Melanie: I would say the victories of which I'm most proud have been supporting an embattled education board where "reformers" won a majority in 2021. It's hard to believe, but only 18 months ago they were battling mask mandates in schools, which they ended. Then they turned to separating from their superintendent, ending his DEI program, and hiring a new superintendent, messaging their decisions so well that criticism was minimal.

This last school year, they were able to pass a parental opt-in for Colorado's privacy-invading "healthy student" surveys. Most recently, they passed a "parental bill of rights" but with a name that taps into the inclusivity trend. They called it Parental Partnership Agreement. Unlike the name Parental Bill of Rights which feeds into the authority moral foundation -- "we're fighting for the Constitution" -- they used fair and care words. Though the liberal members of the board fought it, they voted for it because they couldn't vote against parental partnership, especially considering that studies show kids whose parents are involved in their education do better than kids whose parents aren't involved. So, words matter, which is why I like to reclaim words that the Left has stolen from us that all mean fair, including diversity, equity, and inclusion. When we fight those "fair and care" words, we are perceived as uncaring bigots, and when we reclaim them, we win....and really annoy the left!

Gary: That's a great anecdote, a great story, and that leads me to one of the other questions. Our narrative and voice have been stolen from us. And the American language has been stolen from us. So, to reclaim our language and narrative is, in my mind, crucial, and that's what you do, and you do it in such a way that you understand where the buttons are in arguments and in discussions. You've learned and honed a way to slowly and effectively, functionally avoid some of

those buttons or disable those buttons by getting around them through reclaiming language and adding likeability and compassion, et cetera... and it's brilliant!

So, I guess the question to you would be, how can we all learn to do that better, Melanie, what you do so well?

Melanie: So it takes practice...

Gary: And we hire you, right?

Melanie: *Right!!!*

Gary: Before you answer that, let me just append another little statement, and it is that we're now in a culture where people have their own truth. And so words mean different things to them, they have their own definitions. The newest addition to SCOTUS, can't even define what a woman is because she's not a "biologist."

So, we face that on a daily basis now where people have not only their own truth, but their own definitions of words and language, and it's different than ours. So, in a debate - you debate very well - but one of the agreements in a debate is that we use the same definitions of language, of words. But, that's not the case now. Now we're dealing with alternative definitions and definitions that may simply change the next day.

Melanie: So I have two points.

First, because different words mean different things to different people, don't use labels. Instead, describe what they believe. I don't call school board conservatives by that label because it could turn off some people. So, I call them education reformers. Their opponents aren't teachers because people love and want to support teachers. So, I call them the education establishment.

Second, I always tell people that hostiles cannot be converted, they only can be powered down. And it doesn't even make sense to try unless you're in the presence of persuadables and then persuadables will be drawn to you and your likeability and thoughtfulness, and repelled by the hostility of the hostile. I'm

currently living a story where I'm fighting against a pronoun policy that was instituted in a camp run by an organization on whose board I serve, and they did it without board approval or knowledge. As this story is currently evolving, I'll just say that things are coming my way. It started when outraged parents brought me the pronoun policy. They were aghast that at the start of camp, we were asking impressionable children to introduce themselves with their name and their pronouns. After receiving the policy, I took it to the executive committee of the organization to discuss and take action.

Before the meeting, I had shared with several members on the executive committee that I didn't think it was within the purview of the theater to teach anything other than theater arts. Nor was it appropriate to suggest to impressionable children that they were born in the wrong body, confusing them and potentially separating them from their parents and their parents' beliefs. I also shared a two-minute video of a detransitioner (a woman who underwent testosterone therapy, a mastectomy, and a hysterectomy, only to regret it) testifying before New Hampshire's legislature in favor of a Parental Bill of Rights. I wanted my colleagues to understand the devastating consequences of "socially affirming" a child's new gender identity, potentially putting them on a path to bodily mutilation, permanent infertility, and mental anguish. In her testimony, she says people were just being kind by affirming her new identity and didn't realize they were putting her on the path to such irreversible damage.

At the meeting was an outraged staff member. He came in with what you called his "own truths," as well as medical/academic studies showing that "gender affirming care" saves lives. He and I had worked together for the last 18 months on our Diversity Committee where I had, let's just say, foiled several of his DEI and "land acknowledgement" efforts, by getting the board on my side. Outraged at my latest effort to foil the pronoun policy, he exclaimed that he was offended at the regressiveness of some people on the board. Rather than address my concern about teaching children something that their parents wouldn't approve of, he kept referring to the institutions -- The American Medical Association which supports gender affirming care, and the Pediatric Association, "... and Harvard

this and Yale that, and the truth is he's right. These institutions have been taken over. Just follow the money.

Gary: Indeed.

Melanie: And so, when he finished with his diatribe, I went to find common ground with him, saying: "Can we just agree that we have common ground in that we both care about protecting kids? Can we work together on a policy that asks parents when registering their child whether they have any special considerations for their children, whatever they are, and we will accommodate them? Isn't that better than a blanket one-size-fits-all policy that assumes all kids have the same issue?" Note the use of questions, which helps the persuadables in the room own the answer I want them to have. And then he came back with more anger while invoking the imprimatur of more prestigious institutions... and I said, "You know, I just got back from Germany, and I didn't even know that the eugenics movement that started in America actually inspired the holocaust.

Gary: Please continue.

Melanie: And the eugenics movement was supported by President Theodore Roosevelt and Princeton's President Woodrow Wilson who went on to be President of the United States, among other luminaries. And I said, "And in Europe they're shutting down pediatric gender clinics..."

Gary: Francis Galton started that whole eugenics thing. Right?

Melanie: Right, and Margaret Sanger. So I didn't have much time to make my point but I said, "There are pseudo sciences that have been supported throughout our history, like eugenics, and," I said, "I didn't come to do battle over "gender affirming care," only to suggest that we should be careful to not come between parents and their kids and to not plant the seed in a child's mind that maybe they're born in the wrong body."

I then shared a story – which is Power of Persuasion #5. It's my story of being a Tom Boy and hiding from my Mom that I'd hit puberty, until she figured it out. I

shudder at the thought of growing up in this era where I would have been prodded by authority figures – NOT my parents – to go on puberty blockers. Unlike detransitioners, my story has a happy ending. My mom told me, "I love you just the way you are, you can play with the boys and grow up and be whatever you want." And then I grew out of it. I then mentioned my gay friend who happens to be on the board of this organization. He believes gender affirming care is anti-gay; he says, "they're basically saying that gay people have to change their body. You can't just be gay."

I think this story is as much about appealing to persuadables by articulating what they're thinking silently, but are too afraid to say, as much as it is about neutralizing hostiles.

We're helping them understand they're not alone. That's why if you want to take on a controversial issue, and you do it in Engage to Win style, using the Six Powers of Persuasion, you don't have to have as much courage as you think. It's hard to cancel you, because.... the punchline of the story I just told you is this managing director is leaving the employ of this organization on whose board I serve.

Gary: A great story, thank you. You mentioned hostiles and persuadables. Are there any other categories or are those the two, is that the dichotomy you draw?

Melanie: *Friendlylies* is the third between those two. So we were discussing before how in one message we can appeal to persuadables with a fair and care message that fights for people, and at the same time, power down hostiles without giving them ammunition to use against us, while also uniting friendlylies on the Right. On most issues, I think whether it's climate change, renewable energy, crime, there are large majorities that agree with us on big issues and share our values. It's just that enough of them are peeled off to vote for the compassionate side, aided by false narratives that cast us as ogres, and our own inartfulness. And that's what I'm trying to address with the Six Powers of Persuasion. My Persuasive Messaging Workshops are designed to help conservatives overcome our inartfulness and also overcome our inclination to self-censor.

Gary: One last question. Could you summarize for our readers what it is that they can do to become more persuasive in applying your approach?

Melanie: I think a very easy one to do is try to watch Bill Maher. He is someone who's taken on a lot of the craziness on the Left. He's still on the Left, and he says, "they've left me behind."

I use a lot of his examples, and the reason I do it is because you know his audience is liberal, and you know when he says something that you agree with and his audience claps, that's persuasive. And so that's one way to learn from him and learn from how he makes arguments. On the whole transgender thing he said, "You know when I was 12, I wanted to be a pirate. It's a good thing they didn't take out my eyeball and amputate my leg to give me a peg leg."

Gary: I wanted to be a pirate too...

Melanie: Yeah. So that's an easy one, but the other is just to be conscious of the fact that persuasion is saying something that somebody is already inclined to agree with. That's why people clap when they hear Bill Maher say something they agree with. But when you start with the facts, and this goes to your point about Aristotle's three elements of persuasion....

Gary: Logos, ethos, and pathos....

Melanie: Yeah, so it's logos that's about using facts. You need to have the facts on your side, but when you start with unconsidered facts, you are putting ideas and beliefs out there that people don't know yet, so you won't resonate with what they already believe. Facts can also be uncaring. So, it's best to earn the trust of the person you're trying to persuade by first finding common ground. The other thing we do as conservatives is we fight for things like the Second Amendment, the electoral college, the Constitution, the flag without explaining how those things help people. And so I often say, don't just fight for things, try to explain how those things help people. And when you do that, you've articulated a why, and that's, in the parlance of Simon Sinek's "Start with Why," more compelling.

Martin Luther King had a why that was very compelling. I don't even have to tell you what it is it's so iconic, and people followed him because, as Simon Sinek says, "People follow people who believe what they believe." So, try to articulate things that people already believe and you know you can do that when you make compassion and fairness-framed arguments, enabling you to reach everyone from across the political spectrum. When we fight for people, we come across as caring. Because, and this may be a good place to end, I always tell people if you can remember only one thing from my workshop, remember that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. And we conservatives, we forget that. We just want to say what we know, we want to win the argument, we have the facts at our disposal, and we have the winning arguments, but too often we'll come at people with the facts and then that causes the backfire effect.

My best example of that is the day after George Floyd was killed when people were putting signs in their yards and storefronts saying, "Black Lives Matter." You could have found out on the website of the organization Black Lives Matter what they believe in; they're a Marxist organization, they want to defund the police, they want to dismantle the American family. If you would have told that to a BLM sign-waver, that would have caused the backfire effect.

So instead of sharing those facts, one of the best ways to get them to think again about BLM is to help them understand how their belief actually hurts the very people they most want to help. You can find common ground by saying something like, "of course black lives matter, and that's why I worry about some of the policy positions the organization has taken that would actually reduce the safety and police in neighborhoods where African Americans are most vulnerable to violence. Don't you worry about that?" What I just did there is demonstrate my Sixth Power of Persuasion, the power of the pivot, by asking a question. You can pivot from unfriendly ground to friendly ground by asking a question instead of making a declarative statement. Then people own the answer, and you haven't told them what to believe.

Gary: Any final comments Melanie?

Melanie: *Don't be scared.* Go out and start trying to engage people persuasively and winsomely, and you will discover that if you do it the right way, they will come your way.

And this is how we turn around our society and ultimately our state, making a better future for Coloradans!

Gary: Thank you Melanie!