

## **HOW TO ENGAGE THE NRA IN DISCUSSIONS TO CHANGE GUN REGULATIONS**

by

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The recent announcements by the leadership of the National Rifle Association (NRA) have left gun control advocates chagrined, angry and challenged about successfully being able to pass any form of gun regulation legislation. In formulating a strategic response to the NRA, it would be helpful to consider the psychological research literature on MINDSETS and MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING.

One of the major findings is that in order to change anyone's deep-seated beliefs there is a need to AVOID ARGUMENTATION. Argumentation results in "hardening of the categories" and leads to what is called "reactance," or the firming up of one's beliefs. Individuals who hold strong beliefs like the leadership of the NRA are very skillful at discounting, dismissing, avoiding and reframing any counter data that challenges their beliefs. They hold what is called a "confirmatory bias," whereby they only accept data that fits their prior beliefs.

Instead, there is a need to develop a respectful and inquisitive approach in understanding the basis of someone else's deeply held views and beliefs, no matter how much you may strongly disagree with the other's position. If you pejoratively attack, dismiss, and characterize the NRA as being "tone deaf, if not completely out of touch" or as being "stupid and evil," you inadvertently create more barriers to change.

Moreover, the research on MINDSET indicates that if one holds the belief that the NRA cannot change versus holding a growth mindset, then such an approach will undermine efforts to bring about change and the passage of gun control legislation. The research on mindset and on cognitive behavior therapy offers suggestions about the types of questions that interviewers should employ when questioning NRA leaders and their followers.

For example, instead of challenging them with factual data (e.g., reports of the Harvard School of Public Health), or comparative data from other countries (e.g., lower homicide rates from all other industrialized countries), there is a need to develop a trusting relationship whereby NRA leaders are willing to share their thinking processes on how they came to their current positions. Envision the following exchange with NRA leaders and their members:

"I (interviewer) appreciate the announced commitment of the NRA to protect our school children, so that we can reduce the likelihood of what happened in Newtown, CT ever occurring again. Can I ask you to walk me through the steps that you and your colleagues took in coming to the decision that what is needed are "more guns" in what I believe you call the hands of "good guys" at schools? How did you weigh the pros and cons of advocating for this decision?"

- What, if any, other possible alternative interventions did you consider?
- How are such decisions made?
- Is it up to the leadership to formulate these policies, or is there a committee meeting, or is there a sampling of your membership opinions?
- Could you walk me through the decision-making process?
- How do you weigh the pros and cons of each of these decisional choices?"

Note that the thrust of these inquiries is limited to “How?” and “What?” questions and not “Why?” questions. Keep in mind that NRA mindsets are emotionally-charged deeply-held beliefs, and logically-based arguments will not alter such positions. The interviewer can continue with the NRA leadership by highlighting their observations that violence in Newtown was multiply determined and that any preventive approach needs to be multiply strategic. The interviewer may continue:

“If I understand your position, you are advocating that we need to ensure that individuals who are mentally ill or have committed felonies or have engaged in violent acts should NOT be allowed access to guns. Did I understand your position correctly?” (A major strategy that comes from the behavior change literature is to engage individuals to clearly articulate a goal statement and then help them to DEVELOP A DISCREPANCY between their stated objectives and the consequences of specific acts, such as the fact that in 40% of gun sales background checks are not conducted at gun shows and elsewhere, and that the present system of background information is incomplete or inadequate.) “Would the NRA leaders and membership be willing to collaborate in collecting data on their goal of keeping guns out of the hands of ‘dangerous’ folks?”

The exchange might continue, as follows:

“I want to also commend you on showing leadership in pointing out that our mental health field and schools are deficient in identifying and effectively treating students who are in need of help. As you may know, almost all forms of violence have their beginning much earlier in development. What do you think might be done to improve this situation?” In this way, the NRA might be enlisted in supporting legislation to increase funding for mental-health services in schools. It can be pointed out that the funding for prevention work in schools has been substantially reduced.

One can also commend them for calling for beefed-up security at schools. “What should school superintendents and school principals be asked to do in reporting on their efforts to improve school safety, not only against guns, but gang violence, school bullying, and community violence? Clearly, members of the NRA who are so concerned about reducing violence could be a partner in our country undertaking the challenge of making America safer from ALL FORMS of violence.” The same ‘foot-in-the-door’ approach can be taken with regard to noting the NRA’s observation about a “culture of violence” that is reinforced by violent video games and movies, the presence of bullying, and the like.

Efforts to force legislative change will only lead to more OPPOSITIONAL BEHAVIORS on the part of the NRA. There is a need to express empathy and find areas of agreement; avoid argumentation; encourage the expression of what are called S.M.A.R.T. goals (Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Limited); develop discrepancies between such goals and what is currently in place; and finally, support self-efficacy by enlisting the NRA in collaborative data collection, experimentation, and implementation.

But one might argue that engaging in these strategies misses the big point of banning semi-automatic weapons and high-powered magazine clips. If this is an important objective, it is worth better understanding the nature of the arguments that the leaders of the NRA continually offer. For the moment, get into the mindset of the NRA. Their arguments fall into one (or more) of three categories. They can be labeled Safety, Entitlement, or Enjoyment. All of their arguments and counter-proposals fall into one of these three positions.

1. Safety. One never knows where and when a violent individual might appear and one needs to be prepared, just like having a fire extinguisher present. Listen for how the NRA uses analogies and metaphors to bolster their position against banning semi-assault weapons. They offer examples like Israel where the presence of security forces has supposedly “worked.” A related argument is that the passage of such gun legislation in the past has “failed” and cannot guarantee success. In short, this form of reasoning reflects a form of faulty analogies and comparisons and “black/white” dichotomous thinking. It reflects the confirmatory bias mentioned earlier and even though a point-by-point rebuttal of each data set can be brought to bear, remember that logic and argumentation are not going to change such positions.
2. Entitlement. The Second Amendment to the Constitution guarantees “the right to bear arms.” Such gun ownership reflects individual freedoms and a basic distrust of government. Thus, it is important when engaging with the NRA to highlight in any form of discussion that you concur with their Constitutional right to bear arms and that the intent is not to remove guns from sale. But does the Second Amendment designate whether the type of guns sold can be restricted or licensed? One can even point to the U.S. Supreme Court’s discussion of this point, especially the position of Justice Scalia.
3. Enjoyment. The acts of hunting, target shooting, collection, family time together using guns, and social activities with gun clubs are all desirable and any attempt to legislate about guns will undermine these pleasurable activities. Gun owners should not be penalized because of the violent acts of someone else. This line of thinking is called “magnification,” whereby one small change such as banning semi-automatic weapons and high-charge bullet magazines will escalate and, in fact, is part of a conspiracy

In short, if we are going to try to change gun policy in the U.S., then there is need to better understand the mindset of NRA leadership. There is a need to have credible members of the NRA and politicians who receive the highest NRA ratings offer counter arguments. Attitude change research literature indicates that the person who offers the change message is often more critical than the actual message in getting others to change. Gun control advocates need to find allies within the NRA and bring them on board. They are NOT the enemy, but the key to change. The critical feature is that they have to “go public” with the thinking-processes and self-generated reasons that led them to change their positions on gun legislation.

If we are going to make our country safer, we need to be more collaborative and strategic. Perhaps, such an approach could also be applied in other domains of political discourse?

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