

## Winning Edge #9 – Persuade with a Pause

This is Trevor Bragdon with Commonwealth Partners' *The Winning Edge*: Tips to help conservatives persuade and win.



In May 1940, the British effort to stop Hitler stood in tatters. The British army was pushed back and retreated to the French coast as the Nazis blitzed across Europe.

Across the channel, the British government sat in shambles with Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain about to step down after the failure of “peace in our time.”

But who would be the next Prime Minister? After much maneuvering, it came down to one meeting and two candidates—Lord Halifax, the government’s preferred choice, or the outspoken Winston Churchill.

The meeting started, and the plan became clear. Lord Halifax was the establishment’s choice to lead the nation as Prime Minister. All they needed was Churchill to agree to serve as Lord Halifax’s cabinet minister—effectively the number two position. After some discussion, Churchill was asked to support Halifax.

But Winston Churchill, the great orator, didn’t say anything. He simply sat there and waited for someone else to speak. By his account, the silence lasted over two minutes. Finally, Lord Halifax broke the silence and said he would support Winston Churchill as Prime Minister.

The pause and silence changed everything. Churchill was made Prime Minister hours later and went on to rally the nation to never surrender and to accept only victory.

What Winston Churchill knew is that sometimes the best persuasion is to pause and let the silence do the work.

You may never need to pause and wait for minutes for someone else to speak first, but you can increase your persuasion by using pauses strategically.

There are three types of pauses to use when you speak:

- Long Pause—about 4-5 seconds long
- Medium Pause—about 2-3 seconds
- Short Pause—1-1.5 seconds

The **Long Pause** is effective in focusing or refocusing your audience’s attention.

For example, you’ve been talking and see people have begun to check their phones and lose interest. Finish the thought you are saying and then pause and mentally count to five. We call this the “five-second reset.” At about two seconds, the people paying attention will be leaning in and wondering what you will say next. Because of the pause, they’ll think what you’re about to

say is important. By three to four seconds, the people on their phones will have noticed the silence and begin looking up and wondering what they are missing. At the fifth second, most of the audience will be with you again, and you can reward them by saying something meaningful.

You can also use a long pause at the start of a speech. Before you start talking, look around the room for a moment. Make eye contact with individuals while you count to four, and then begin. When done well, the long pause conveys confidence and builds anticipation.

The **Medium Pause** is all about giving your words room to work.

If you have a great story in your speech, when you finish telling it, pause and count to three and let the story do its work. Or if you deliver what you know is a great line, pause for two seconds and let your audience enjoy the line. Or when you give a powerful fact or statistic, pause to let people process it. Most of us are slower at processing abstract info, so give it a second or two to work.

The final type of pause, the **Short Pause**, is not really a pause at all. It's more like a "period" at the end of a sentence. When we write, we end sentences with periods signifying the close of a thought. But often, when we speak, it can become one long run-on sentence. The key is to work in short pauses or "periods" to let the listener know the thought is done.

A good exercise is to mentally say "Period" to yourself when you're speaking and finish a thought. That little pause is just enough to signal the thought is complete.

Winston Churchill was a master at all three types of pauses. You can hear it in this speech he gave to rally the English people four days after becoming Prime Minister.

*You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: Victory. Victory at all costs—Victory in spite of all terror—Victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no survival.*

[https://youtu.be/80\\_HXIH724?t=250](https://youtu.be/80_HXIH724?t=250)

The next time you are giving a speech, remember Winston Churchill and the power of a pause. Long Pauses of 4-5 seconds to focus the audience. Medium Pauses of 2 to 3 seconds to allow people to enjoy a line or a story. Finally, use Short Pauses, or saying the word "Period" to yourself, to signal the end of a thought.

And remember, sometimes the best persuasion is to pause and let silence do the work.

#### **Sources:**

[Silence Wins the Day](#)

Churchill, Winston S. *The Gathering Storm* (Winston S. Churchill *The Second World War*) (p. 597-8). RosettaBooks. Kindle Edition.

Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat Speech - [https://youtu.be/80\\_HXIH724?t=250](https://youtu.be/80_HXIH724?t=250)