

Winning Edge #22 – Creating Your Character Story

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



Richard Oglesby had a big problem. He needed to create a way for his candidate to connect with the public. Up to this point, the candidate's public image was of an accomplished, sophisticated lawyer. But how do you make someone who is successful, eloquent, and seemingly not relatable connect with everyday working-class voters? To make matters worse, it was May, and his candidate was considered a longshot at best.

Oglesby thought, what if he could find a story from the candidate's early years to humanize him? A story to show voters the type of person the candidate was. What he needed was a character story. Oglesby finally found it while talking to an old coworker of the candidate.

The coworker told him how thirty years before, they had worked together in hard manual labor, building fences and splitting rails. The coworker then took him on a ride to see the fence they'd built. Oglesby realized he'd struck gold and could create the perfect story and borrowed two rails from the fence.

The story he created was the story of a self-made man, a hard worker who grew up on the frontier, a man who had done the manual labor of splitting rails to make money. A man who knew what it was like to work hard for a living, just like the voters, but was now a polished and motivating speaker.

At the state Republican convention, Oglesby had the two rails paraded in before the speech of the dark-horse candidate, the rail-splitter named Abraham Lincoln.

The delegates loved the rail-splitter story, and it became his tagline and launched him as the presidential pick of the convention. The press wrote of Lincoln, "many delegates in a thoughtful mood, contrasted the present position of the noble, self-taught, self-made statesman and patriot...with that of the humble pioneer and railmaker of thirty years ago."

That story and image of Lincoln the rail-splitter drew a sharp contrast with his opponent, who was considered elite and out of touch. In fact, it was so effective the Democrats tried to co-opt it and label Lincoln as not a rail-splitter but a “hair splitter” because of his anti-slavery position.

The story of Lincoln's "rail-splitter" image is a powerful example of how a well-crafted character story can resonate with voters and humanize a candidate. This was true in 1860, and it's true today. But most candidates don't have an Oglesby to craft a winning story and message. The good news—you don't need one. You can create your own character story.

A well-crafted character story allows you to show your values, integrity, and personal growth. It gives voters a deeper understanding of who you are as a person.

Your character story should demonstrate your passion, professional qualifications, and personal growth. Here are three types of stories to consider: a passion story, a professional story, or a personal story.

1. **Passion Story:** Share why you're driven to run and serve. This could be your long-term commitment to a specific issue or how you've overcome challenges to fight for your beliefs.
2. **Professional Story:** Highlight your qualifications, experience, and ability to get things done. This could include a story about how you “make change happen” in your career.
3. **Personal Story:** Showcase your grit and lessons learned through a personal challenge or failure that shaped your character and approach to leadership.

Remember, a character story is about transformation—how a particular experience or challenge changed your perspective or made you grow. To brainstorm potential stories, reflect on the difficult things you've done that you look back on with pride. This could be your proudest moments, challenges overcome, or lessons learned.

The key to crafting a story is to make it short and impactful:

- Keep stories concise (1 to 2 minutes)
- Jump right into the action with minimal setup
- Follow a clear beginning, middle, and end structure
- Conclude with the insight or lesson learned from the experience

- Practice the stories to make them feel authentic and natural to share

Authenticity is key. Be honest and genuine in your storytelling. Voters can tell when a story feels stretched or manufactured. Test your stories with trusted advisors, family, or friends to get feedback and refine your delivery.

For example, if I told a character story about Richard Oglesby, I wouldn't focus on how he was elected governor three times, how he fought and was wounded as a Civil War general, his strong anti-slavery stance, or his close friendship to Lincoln, including being by his side when Lincoln died.

I would instead tell you the story of Oglesby when he was just eight years old. Both parents had died, and his family's farm in Kentucky was being sold off, along with a slave named Tim. Oglesby tried everything he could as a little kid to buy Tim's freedom and failed. But he promised Tim he would find a way to set him free. It took nearly two decades to fulfill that promise. But after risking it all in the California gold rush, Oglesby sent money to Kentucky to find Tim and purchase his freedom.

This story tells you in 87 words more about the person Oglesby was than any professional achievements. That's a character story.

Think about your own life and identify the moments that have shaped your character and leadership. Then craft a compelling story to resonate with voters. By developing a powerful, honest character story, you'll forge a deeper connection with voters and show how you are the right person for the job.

Source: **Richard J. Oglesby, Lincoln's Rail-Splitter**, Mark A. Plummer. Illinois Historical Journal, Vol. 80, No. 1 (Spring, 1987), pp. 2-12