

Winning Edge #24 – Answering the Tough Questions

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



An important skill to develop as a candidate is the ability to answer tough questions while being calm and confident. Whether you're in a debate or an interview, the way you handle challenging questions can make or break your campaign. In this episode of the *Winning Edge*, we'll explore five tactics you can use to turn around tough questions to show your strengths and connect with voters.

1. Bridging – acknowledge, then pivot

Have a question not directly related to your core message? Use bridging to take the conversation back to your issue or talking point. Acknowledge the question briefly, then pivot to the message you want to convey. Bridging allows you to control the narrative and keep the focus on your strengths.

Example:

Q: "Your opponent says your tax plan will hurt small businesses. How do you respond?"

A: "I'm glad you brought up small businesses. The truth is, my plan is designed specifically to help small businesses grow by [insert key message about your plan].

What's really important is making sure small businesses have the support they need to succeed..."

2. Reframing – don't accept the frame you're given

Get a question based on a flawed premise or a misrepresentation of your position? Reframe the question to clarify your stance and move the conversation to more favorable ground.

Example:

Q: "Pennsylvania's schools have been chronically underfunded for years. Wouldn't your proposal accelerate the funding crisis?"

A: "I have to respectfully disagree with the idea that Pennsylvania's schools are underfunded. The truth is our state actually ranks 8th in the nation when it comes to spending per student. We're spending about \$4,000 more per student than the national

average. My plan is about making sure schools have the funding they need while also ensuring that every kid, no matter where they live, has access to an education that fits his or her unique learning needs. It's about giving all students the quality education they deserve."

3. The Three R's – Regret, Reason, & Remedy

Made a mistake you need to address? Use the "Three R's" to show humility, provide context, and offer a solution. Express **regret** for the situation, explain the **reasons** behind what happened, and then tell the **remedy** - how you've learned from the experience and what you'll do differently going forward.

Example:

Q: "You've faced criticism for your handling of the budget crisis last year. What went wrong?"

A: "We presented a strong budget proposal, and I regret that some lawmakers chose to prioritize special interests over Pennsylvanians' interest. My hope is that they've learned that doing so only hurts their constituents in the long run. Going forward, I'll continue to fight for fiscally responsible budgets that help all Pennsylvanians."

4. Flagging – highlight your important points

Have a crucial point? Don't hope the audience knows it's important. Instead, verbally draw attention to your point (plant a flag) before you say it. Flagging can be useful when discussing complex policy or correcting a common misconception. Think of flagging like verbally highlighting part of your answer.

Example:

Q: "Your school choice proposal will cost local public schools a lot of money. How will local schools deal with the loss of funds?"

A: "The most important thing to remember in this whole discussion on school choice is this: kids shouldn't be trapped by the zip code they live in. If their school system is failing, they should have a choice to go to a better school."

5. Personalizing – Relate and resonate

Want to make an issue or answer more relatable? Personalize your answer with a short story that shows you understand the problems and share the audience values. Personalizing your response with a short story can help you build trust with your audience as you draw on your own experiences and emotions.

Example:

Q: “Many families are struggling with rising healthcare costs. What’s your plan to address this?”

A: “This issue is personal for me. When I was growing up, my father was hurt on the job, and our family faced medical bills that nearly bankrupted us. No family should have to go through that. That’s why I’m fighting for [insert healthcare plan]...”

As you prepare for your next debate or interview, take an hour to practice these techniques. Have a list of practice questions, and then role-play with someone asking you each one. Particularly focus on your skills of bridging, reframing, and personalizing your answers. For mistakes you’ve made, practice your specific Three R response - regret, reason and remedy. In any answer, you can use flagging to highlight the most important point you want the audience to pay attention to.

Remember, answering tough questions isn’t about dodging or deflecting - it’s about staying true to your message, connecting with your audience, and showing your skills under pressure. By incorporating these five tactics into your communication strategy, you’ll be ready to handle any question that comes your way and emerge stronger to voters.