

# Engaging The **UNDERDOG** **EDGE** for Persuasion Success

BY AMY SHOWALTER

In these situations, no matter what your title or reputation, you're not involved in an equal partnership. You're the underdog. If you're the team leader, you're the underdog to your boss. If you're the taxpayer, you're the underdog to the IRS. Even if you're the CEO, you're the underdog to the elected official. If you're the interview candidate, you're the underdog to the potential employer.

As an underdog, you have no power or advantage. You hold none of the "cards" while the person you want to persuade holds all of them. You are engaged in upward influence, one of the most challenging influence encounters you'll face. Rest assured that you'll have to influence up the food chain many times to get what you want in your work and personal lives.

## **The Powerful Have a Psychological Need to Help Underdogs**

Research shows that people tend to see individuals of high status as more influential, competent, and worthy than low-status (underdog) individuals or groups. The low-status individuals and groups are more likely to be targets of prejudice and negative stereotyping, and they're more likely to be seen as unworthy and incompetent.

However, there is an upside to being the underdog. Do you remember cheering for any of the following people or teams? Reality show singing sensation Susan Boyle. The Butler University men's basketball team playing against Duke in the 2010 men's NCAA championship game. The Chicago Cubs. Many of us have

Think of a problem you're trying to solve:

- Maybe you want to get raises for your team members.
- Perhaps you have a dispute with the IRS.
- Maybe you are the CEO who needs a legislator to vote for a bill that enables your company to expand into new markets.
- Maybe you want that “plum” job.



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or continue to root for these individuals or teams. We love the underdog; it's in our DNA.

This love of the underdog is intriguing because it violates classic social psychology theory that suggests an important part of our self-worth derives from identifying with successful, high-status organizations and groups. A core tenet of social identity theory asserts that the accomplishments of the groups with which we affiliate are a crucial source of our self-esteem. We are better people (or at least we think we are) when we're aligned with winners.

Powerful people many times suffer from what psychologists call the "imposter syndrome," where they feel like they don't deserve the fruits of their labors. They doubt whether they are smart and accomplished. This is the underdog's edge. The powerful people who feel this way now have, with an underdog request, the opportunity to say, "Look, I help others, I'm not the bad guy." Further, because underdogs have a lot of heart and grit, we see them as good and moral people. Therefore, it makes us feel more moral to help other moral people."

So how does this impact you as an individual underdog in extreme influence situations? It gives you an enormous advantage. Social science indicates that most of us have an innate desire to live in a world of equality; we want a level playing field, or at least a level field of opportunity. And powerful people have a stronger need for equality than the rest of us.

## People Buy from Underdogs

Recent research has found a trend that underdog positioning even influences consumer behavior. Researchers are noticing an increase in underdog branding as a marketing strategy, particularly with a firm's biography. Even if a company is now large, if they struggled to survive in the early days (Apple, Southwest Airlines) they have an appeal because underdog stories about overcoming great odds through passion and determination resonate, and especially during difficult times. Their stories inspire us and help us see that if you work hard, have some grit, and play by the rules, success is still possible.

Underdogs are winning at the polls — in 2010, more than 100 new members of Congress were elected and 30 of them had never been elected to any public office. Even the Oscars have seen underdog winners like the movie "Slumdog Millionaire."

## Not All Underdogs are Equal: Obtaining Underdog "Street Cred"

While you may now agree that underdogs have persuasive appeal, you might be asking why some underdogs get what they want and oth-

ers don't. The reason is that there are five characteristics of winning underdogs that researchers have found to be required before the underdog formula is a persuasive underdog formula. They are:


Few resources. This seems intuitive, but many organizations and individuals promote their wealth and resources before their hard work and grit. The more resources you have, the greater expectations for success (and the resulting loss of underdog positioning).

Don't squander the resources you do have, and show that you worked hard for them.

Keep others' expectations of you low.

Don't call yourself the underdog. Research shows that label must come from a third party to be credible.

Use unconventional tactics. Effective underdogs don't use the same tactics as their Goliath adversary.

The next time you find yourself with an upward influence situation, try positioning yourself as the underdog. Remember, the powerful person you are trying to persuade has a deep-seated need to help true underdogs, and you can meet that need. 

**Amy Showalter** is the author of *The Underdog Edge: How Ordinary People Change the Minds of the Powerful ... and Live to Tell About It*. She is a speaker and consultant who helps organizations and individuals get powerful people on their side. Her clients include Southwest Airlines, Pfizer, The American Heart Association, NFIB, and International Paper. For more information, please visit [www.showaltergroup.com](http://www.showaltergroup.com) or [www.underdogedge.com](http://www.underdogedge.com). She can be reached at (513) 762-7668 or [amy@showaltergroup.com](mailto:amy@showaltergroup.com).

