Once in a while you will encounter people who try to overpower you instead of persuading you. They do not overwhelm you with facts or arguments. Rather, they roll over you with the force of their personalities. Their challenges come quickly, one after another, keeping you from collecting your wits and giving a thoughtful answer.

If this description sounds familiar, then you have been steamrolled. Men are frequently guilty of steamrolling, especially when talking with women, but women can be offenders, too.

Steamrollers have a defining characteristic. They constantly interrupt. As soon as you begin to answer, they hear something they don't like in your explanation, interrupt, then pile on another challenge. If you try to go down the new path, they interrupt again, firing questions, changing the subject, yet never really listening to anything you say. You find yourself constantly off balance and on the defensive.

Though there are benevolent steamrollers – overly excitable, but not hostile – most are insincere. Steamrollers are not usually interested in answers. They are interested in winning through intimidation. It is easier for them to ask the hard questions than to listen to an answer that is more than a shallow, ten-second sound byte.

Because steamrollers are so aggressive, you must manage them aggressively, though you do not need to be rude. For some, it will take a little courage and intestinal fortitude to face up to such a powerhouse at first. However, once you learn the following three steps to stop a steamroller, you will discover that getting back into the driver's seat is easier than you thought.

**STEP ONE: STOP HIM**

The first step in dealing with a steamroller is a mild one. Even though you may feel pushed to your limits by the annoyance, don't fire back in kind, guaranteeing a head-on collision. However, don't buckle at the knees, either. “Once your opponent has intimidated you and knows it, you've lost,” says William Dembski, a veteran of many encounters with hostile challengers of Intelligent Design.

Instead, your first move should be a genial request for courtesy. Stop the intrusion by momentarily putting the discussion on “pause.” Then, briefly get permission to continue your point without being interrupted. Use a little body language if you need to, raising your hand a bit for emphasis.

It takes longer to describe it than to do it. Simply hold up your hand and...
gently say, “I’m not quite finished,” and then continue. Often this is all you need to do to restore order to the conversation.

If the steamroller is especially aggressive, be calm and wait for an opening. Do not try to talk over him if he isn’t cooperating at first. When you get a pause, don’t be afraid to ask for a reasonable amount of time to make your point. Quickly negotiate an informal agreement. You ask him to give you something – patience and courtesy – so that you can give him something in return – an answer. Here are some variations:

•  “Is it okay with you if I take a few moments to answer your question before you ask another? I’ll give you a chance to respond when I get done. Will that work?”
•  “That’s not a simple issue. I need a moment to explain myself. Is that okay?”
•  “Let me respond to your first challenge. When I’m done, you can jump in again with another. Is that all right?”
•  “That’s a good question, and it deserves a decent answer, but that will take a few minutes. Are you okay with that?”

Notice the negotiation here. You make a petition, and he grants it. With more aggressive steamrollers, it is especially important for them to verbally consent to your request. (Of course, if a person answers “no” to any of these questions, you might ask him why he brought the challenge up in the first place.)

Be careful not to let annoyance or hostility creep into your voice. That would be a mistake, especially with this kind of person. Don’t let a steamroller get under your skin. Being defensive and belligerent always looks weak. Instead, stay focused on the issues, not on the attitude. Talk calmly and try to look confident.

Be sure to respond adequately to one question before you are forced to tackle another, but don’t take unfair advantage of the time you buy with this little negotiation. Make your point, then ask, “Does that make sense to you?” This invites him back into the conversation. Give him the courtesy of offering you a reply without interruption. You do not want to be a steamroller yourself.

**STEP TWO: SHAME HIM**

If the steamroller breaks trust with your agreement, or if you can’t succeed in stopping him in the first place to negotiate an orderly conversation, move to phase two of the Steamroller tactic. This step is more aggressive. It also takes a bit more courage because you will now be directly confronting the rudeness of an impolite person.

You might consider using his name at this point. It will soften the exchange. A person’s name is important to him. Keep this in mind when conversations begin to take a hostile turn. At the first sign of tension, use their name in a friendly manner as you continue. It really helps take the edge off.

You tried to stop the steamroller. That didn’t work. Now you want to shame him for his bad manners, but you want to do it with integrity. Start by taking the same basic approach you did in Step One. This time, though, make an explicit request for courtesy.

First, ignore any new challenges he has introduced. Do not follow his rabbit trails. Second, address the steamroller problem directly. If you are not able to get the floor right away, let him talk. When he finally pauses, look him in the eye and calmly say something like this:

•  “Can I ask you a favor? I’d love to respond to your concern, but you keep breaking in. Could I have a few moments without being cut off to develop my point?
Then you can tell me what you think. Is that okay with you?” Wait for a response.

• “Can I ask you a quick question? Do you really want a response from me? At first I thought you did, but when you continue to interrupt I get the impression you want an audience. If so, just let me know and I’ll listen. But if you want an answer, you’ll have to give me time to respond. Tell me what you want. I need to know before I can continue.” Wait for an answer.

• “Here’s what I have in mind. You make your point, and I’ll be polite and listen. When you’re done, it will be your turn to be polite to me and not interrupt while I respond. Then, I’ll let you have your say without breaking in. I need to know if that’s okay with you. If not, this conversation is over. What would you like to do?” Wait for a response.

Notice that each example I have offered is progressively more direct. You have to judge which one is appropriate for the circumstances you face. The last one is very aggressive. If you started this way, you would be out of line. With some people, though, a direct approach like this is the only thing that will save the conversation. Use it only after the other person has used up a lot of grace.

Remember, steamrollers are strong customers who sometimes need to be addressed with equal strength, yet coupled with civility. This can be harder if you have a gentle spirit, but unless you toughen up at this stage, you’ll get nowhere.

Hopefully, Step Two will work. The steamroller might even be ashamed and apologize. Accept his gesture graciously, then return to his original issue and deal with it. Say, “Let’s go back to the beginning. Your challenge as I understand it is this…(repeat the question). Now, here is how I’d like to respond.”

This second step is very effective in taming even the most belligerent steamroller. Don’t be snippy or smug. Stay focused, stay pleasant, stay gracious, but stay in control.

If this doesn’t work, go immediately to Step Three.

STEP THREE: LEAVE HIM

First you stop him, then, you shame him. If that doesn’t work, you leave him. When all else fails, let it go. Walk away. If the steamroller won’t let you answer, listen politely until he’s finished, then drop it. Let him have the satisfaction of having the last word, then shake the dust off your feet and move on. Wisdom dictates not wasting time with this kind of fool.

This last step is informed by a simple bit of insight: Not everyone deserves an answer. This may sound odd at first. Characteristically, an ambassador is always ready, alert for any chance to represent Christ, not backing away from a challenge or an opportunity. Sometimes, though, the wisest course of action may be to bow out graciously.

Jesus warned, “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine” (Matthew 7:6). He followed His own advice, too. Jesus was amazingly tight-lipped before Pilate (“Jesus gave him no answer,” John 19:9). At times, He was also evasive with religious leaders intent on tricking Him (“Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things,” Matthew 21:27).

Knowing when to step back requires the ability to separate the hogs and the dogs from the lost sheep looking for a shepherd. But how do you know when someone’s crossed the line? When do we have an obligation to speak, and when should we save our pearls for another time?

Part of the answer can be found in Jesus’ next words in Matthew 7:6: “…lest they trample [the pearls] under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.” Be generous with the truth except with someone who shows utter contempt for the precious gift being offered him. He will simply trample it in the mud and then viciously turn on you.

If you sense someone pawing the turf and readying for a charge, it may be time to leave. You are under no compulsion to waste your efforts on people like this. There is plenty of ripe fruit waiting to be harvested. Save your energy for more productive encounters.

Of course, there are times when you will find yourself in a Jeremiah situation, being faithful to speak the truth even though it falls on deaf ears. But those occasions are not the rule. Usually, wisdom dictates we ration our efforts.

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There is an exception to this principle, however. I’ve learned from my radio show that sometimes my real audience is not the person I am talking to, but the people who are listening in, eavesdropping on the conversation.

This happens more often than you may think, even if you are not a radio host. Sometimes a word spoken to a hardened heart bounces off and hits a soft one. You may not even know anyone else was listening. Years later you discover that the Holy Spirit had a different audience in mind for your efforts. This has happened to me many times. Lee Strobel calls this “ricochet evangelism.”

Incidentally, when I face an aggressive challenger, I often give him the last word. Not only is this gracious, it’s powerful. It conveys a deep sense of confidence in your own view. Instead of fighting for the final say-so, give it away. Make your concluding point clearly and succinctly, and then say, “I’ll let you have the last word.” But don’t break this promise. Grant him his parting shot, and then let it rest. Never match a steamroller’s incivility with rudeness. Instead, stay focused on the issues, talk calmly and try to stay confident.

If you don’t succeed in stopping the steamroller with your first attempt, consider using his name to soften the exchange. Then make a more explicit request for an orderly conversation.

Remember, not everyone deserves an answer. Sometimes the wisest course of action is to bow out graciously.

Always be aware of those around you who might be eavesdropping on the conversation. They might be the audience the Holy Spirit has in mind.

When you encounter a steamroller never fire back in kind, guaranteeing a head-on collision. Instead, “pause” the conversation and then request the basic courtesy of being able to make your point without interruption.

Don’t try to talk over a steamroller. Wait for an opening and use a little body language, raising your hand a bit for emphasis if necessary.

Be careful not to let annoyance or hostility creep into your voice. Instead, stay focused on the issues, talk calmly and try to stay confident.

For the kingdom,
Gregory Koukl, president

1 This article is adapted from Gregory Koukl, Tactics – A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).
STR Speakers Schedules

GREG KOUKL

January
- 18   Reformation Lutheran Church, El Cajon, CA 7 p.m. Topic: “Columbo: A Strategy for Discussing Your Faith” Contact: (619) 447-6471 or www.freelutheran.org
- 23-25 Covenant Presbyterian Church, West Lafayette, IN Contact: (765) 463-7303 or http://www.covenantpres.org

February
- 7    Calvary Chapel, Santa Barbara, CA 9 a.m. conference Topic: “Has God Spoken?” Contact: http://www.calvarychapelsb.com or (805) 730-1400
- 13   North Coast Calvary Chapel, Carlsbad, CA 7 p.m. Topic: “Same-sex Marriage” Contact: (760) 929-0029, ext. 147 or www.northcoastcalvary.org
- 26-28 Apologetics Tactics & Communication course, Biola Apologetics Program, La Mirada, CA Contact: (888) 332-4652

BRETT KUNKLE

January
- 16-18 Chapel by the Sea, Anchorage, AK Topics: “The Atheist Challenge,” “Truth and the Real World,” “True for You, But Not for Me?,” “Is One Way the Only Way?” Contact: (951) 343-5010
- 28   California Baptist University, Riverside, CA 10 & 11 a.m. Topic: TBD Contact: (951) 343-5010

February
- 6-8  New Covenant Community Church, Fresno, CA Topic: Training for Berkeley Mission trip Contact: (559) 298-0688
- 12-16 Crossline Community Church, Mission Viejo, CA Topic: Training for Berkeley Mission trip Contact: (949) 916-0250 or www.crux33.com
- 26   Woodcrest Christian School, Riverside, CA 9:15 a.m. Topic: TBD Contact: (951) 780-2010 or www.woodcrestchristian.org

ALAN SHLEMON

January
- 18   First Family Church, Overland Park, KS 6:00 p.m. Topic: “Euthanasia” Contact: (913) 681-3341 or www.ffc.org
- 24   Right to Life League of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 1:00 p.m. Topic: “Making Abortion Unthinkable” Contact: (626) 398-6100
This month

REMEMBER the SANCTITY of LIFE

Get all the facts from STR on what makes human beings valuable, and then use these resources to learn to argue graciously & persuasively.

Looking to supplement your study of Greg’s new book, Tactics — A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions? Greg’s invaluable teaching on this subject is also available in the following formats:

**TACTICS IN DEFENDING THE FAITH** by Gregory Koukl, Five mentoring audio CDs (CD238) $24.95.

Learn the techniques Greg has taught thousands of others that will put you in the driver’s seat in every exchange. You’ll learn specific skills to help you:

- Initiate conversations effortlessly
- Stop challengers in their tracks and turn the tables
- Graciously and effectively expose faulty thinking
- Maneuver through minefields
- Present the truth clearly, cleverly, and persuasively

You don’t need to hit home runs. You don’t even need to get on base. Just getting up to bat – engaging others in friendly conversation – will do. And Tactics will teach you how. All you have to do is listen while Greg walks you step by step through the material as your personal tutor. Soon, your conversations with friends will look more like diplomacy than warfare.

**TACTICS IN DEFENDING THE FAITH** by Gregory Koukl, Two interactive DVDs with data CD for Small Group Study (DVD006) $49.95.

Included are six one-hour interactive sessions on DVD with discussion, role-playing, self-assessment quizzes, recall exercises, memory tools, games, and competition. Comprehensive leader and student manuals are included in PDF for printing and copying. And when you learn the material well enough to teach this course without the DVD, use the PowerPoint slides included on the data CD.

You will have everything needed to teach or facilitate a group to be stronger and better equipped to skillfully present their faith and the reasons why Jesus Christ is the answer.

Most conversations we have about abortion are difficult. What if you had the tools to start the conversation and make it productive? Common Ground Without Compromise can help.

**SPECIAL** COMMON GROUND WITHOUT COMPROMISE by Steve Wagner, softcover book and two audio CDs (CD291) $15.95

This special package contains:

COMMON GROUND Softcover book
Written to both sides of the debate, this book will help you develop your view of abortion or advocate for your position within the context of friendly dialogue.

**new** COMMON GROUND Two audio CDs
Based on his book of the same name, these new audio CDs from Steve Wagner will encourage you to create discussion about abortion even with those who disagree. A foundation of common ground, he argues, provides a safe atmosphere for people on all sides of the issue to clarify their views, listen to alternate perspectives, and even change their minds. A perfect companion for the book.

Both Common Ground book (BK305) $11.99 and Common Ground audio CD set (CD290) $8.95, are available separately.