

GOP Seating Arrangement Changed the Debate

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Did you notice in last night's GOP debate that people were less on the attack and more respectful of one another?

That may have been planned to display unity against the President -- but it also may have been a result of the way they were seated. Last night's debate took place around a table.

Understanding the impact of seating arrangements is an important part of nonverbal communication at any meeting.

For example: There are two power positions at any conference table – the dominant chair at the head of the table facing the door and the “visually central” seat in the middle of the row of chairs on the side of the table that faces the door. Choosing the dominant chair may be the most effective way for a leader to control the agenda or dominate the meeting, but it also stifles collaboration. When the leader takes this spot, ideas are then directed to him or her for validation (or rejection) rather than to the entire group. So take a moment before your next meeting and think about the relationship you want to establish with team members. Then choose your seat accordingly: Sit at the head of the table or at mid-point on the side if you want to exert control, and choose any other position around the table if you want to state symbolically that you are an equal member of a collaborative team.

Seating positions may even help create leaders. For example, it's been noticed that people who sit at either end of the table in a jury room are more likely to be elected foreman and that persons in visually central positions (that mid-point previously mentioned), are also more likely to be perceived as leaders. In the jury scenario, choice of foreman is mainly about the symbolism of the head-of-the-table position, and with the central position, it is more about the power of eye contact: Because the person seated in this central location is able to maintain eye contact with the most group members, he or she will be able to interact with more people and as a result, will most likely emerge as the leader. (So, if you wanted to enhance the leadership credibility of a junior team member, it would be wise to seat him or her in one of these two positions.)

Have you ever noticed that when two people sit at a table, they often choose chairs on opposite sides? This is automatically adversarial in terms of territory – the kind of seating

arrangement that divorce attorneys and their clients typically adopt. Groups of people may also sit on opposite sides of a conference table and unwittingly divide into an “us” and “them” mentality.

Sitting at right angles is the arrangement most conducive to informal conversation. Sitting side by side is the next best. This is important to remember if you want to foster personal ties between team members. If you intentionally mix up the seating arrangements (or hold your meeting at a round table – as they did for the debate) you can discourage the tendency to “take sides.”