

SCOTT ADAMS HAS BEEN THE FORE-most commentator on the American workplace for the last three decades. Or rather, Dilbert, Dogbert, Pointy-Haired Boss and a cast of other cubicle-cramped characters have been. As the author of the widely syndicated comic strip “Dilbert,” which will celebrate its 30th anniversary in 2019, Mr. Adams has depicted with dry humor and now-iconic figures the pedantic tribulations of the American workplace and its exhausted stewards.

While Mr. Adams is known first and foremost for “Dilbert,” his pursuits are wide-ranging. He has trained in hypnosis, writ-

Adams might predict next. The musician Kanye West has been known to watch and retweet Mr. Adams’ Periscope videos.

Though Mr. Adams says he has no political party affiliation and describes himself as “politically left” of Bernie Sanders, his staunch defense of Trump’s persuasive skills has cost Adams some of his left-leaning following – and by his own estimates about 40 percent of his income as a speaker. That didn’t stop Mr. Adams from visiting Mr. Trump in the Oval Office in August. The T-shirt-loving cartoonist even bought a suit for the occasion.

Mr. Adams’ latest book is best-seller *Win Bigly: Persuasion in a World Where Facts Don’t Matter*. It analyzes Mr. Trump’s powers

DILBERT

ten several best-selling books, invented a high-nutrition vegan microwavable burrito dubbed the “Dilberito,” and produced an app called WhenHub, which connects laypeople to self-proclaimed experts in various subjects, with transactions paid in an Adams-created cryptocurrency called “When.”

But Mr. Adams entered a whole new realm of notoriety when, in 2015, he predicted that Donald Trump would secure the GOP candidacy and ultimately the United States presidency, long before the outcome was an even remotely legitimate possibility.

Mr. Adams attributes that foresight to his expertise in persuasion. He saw in Mr. Trump a set of skills perfectly honed to persuade an unsuspecting public largely unconcerned with facts.

Mr. Adams, who is active on Twitter, discusses daily news and the Trump administration’s various moves through Periscope, a live video streaming app. Thousands (20,000 to 30,000 per day) tune in to hear what Mr.

ON TRUMP

SCOTT ADAMS, creator of the iconic “Dilbert” cartoon, called Donald Trump’s victory when the candidate was seen as more punchline than presidential. He talks with Brunswick’s **EMILY LIBRESCO**.



Scott Adams with a cutout of his famous cartoon creation, and Snickers, his dog.

of persuasion and offers instruction on how to communicate more effectively.

Brunswick spoke with Mr. Adams about how he predicted what few saw coming, and how Mr. Trump's approach might be useful to business leaders, whether or not they want to admit it.

What was it you saw in President Trump early on that so many others missed?

What I noticed right away is Trump had more persuasive tools at his disposal than most politicians. They all think they're persuading, but they tend to persuade with pretty ordinary techniques. Trump not only had more skills, he had a higher risk profile. There are tools he would use that nobody else would consider because they couldn't take the heat. Have you heard of *The Power of Positive Thinking*?

Yes.

Norman Vincent Peale published it in 1952 and it sold tens of millions of copies. When I was a kid, that was the big book about how to get ahead and how to think your way into a better place. And Norman Vincent Peale was the Trump family pastor.

Growing up, Trump sat in the pew and got to listen to the most persuasive person of his generation – Norman Vincent Peale was so persuasive, in fact, that he was accused of being a hypnotist.

But there were other things about Trump's skill set that I saw that you just didn't see with other politicians. For instance, he likes to focus on simple visual images. He's got the Make America Great Again hat. He's also got the wall. Even without a photo, everybody could imagine their own wall. It's visual even without the picture. But then he added the pictures and it became even more visual.

Trump makes us think "past the sale." When he says, "The wall will be 30 feet tall" and he visits the prototypes, he makes you think about what kind of wall it will be. That's thinking past, "Will there even be a wall?" It's simple and basic. But it's something that politicians don't do. And he's uniquely consistent in using these tactics. He didn't just get lucky.

People who don't understand persuasion look for other reasons he succeeded. They'll say he just picked the right topics or pandered to his base. But I would argue that he knew how to pick the right topics; that's part of the technique. There were lots of things he could have chosen. And every candidate had the same topics available to them. But he's the only one who chose the topics that had the most energy.

He knows that people are somewhat irrational about the facts. They understand energy better than

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the facts. So he made sure he had the highest and the right energy. You remember when Saturday Night Live had Trump and Clinton on at different times?

Right.

The biggest challenge Trump had in 2016 was getting people to imagine him as president. It just seemed so implausible. So he approved an "SNL" skit where he was shown as the president in the Oval Office. There were jokes around that – most of them at his expense – but they faded. And now you remember the image. He fixed his, "You can't imagine me as president" problem by providing a memorable image. Hillary also approved her skit, which showed her as a customer in a bar. She had already said how much she liked to drink, and she was running against the first non-drinking president of all time. Wrong choice of image and wrong energy.

In your book, you mention that President Trump employs "the big ask."

When he's negotiating, he asks for something so unreasonable that you shake your head and say, "I can't even believe he's asking for that. He's asking to deport 14 million people who have been living here as good citizens." And then when he got into office, as I predicted, he dropped the extreme perspective, even though he's still tough on immigration.

Those things would have seemed extreme, but he created a frame in which they seem more reasonable. Now, in my opinion, he never meant to deport 14 million people. It was just a framing technique that got him into office and allowed him some more flexibility. He's done his same technique where he goes big, and then he backs off, and he still wins.

Could President Trump win re-election?

The reason that question can't be answered is if the news about the treatment of children along the border had happened a week before the election, it's a different thing than if it happens now.

I think everything surrounding Russia will be shown to be overblown, meaning Trump himself will not suffer any fallout. In all likelihood the economy's going to be great, and North Korea will be going in the right direction, though full denuclearization could take years. It's entirely possible too that Trump can cause something good to happen in the Middle East, the other gigantic wildcard. Partly because he's lucky to be in the right place at the right time, and partly because he's the deal maker.

If he gets the Middle East, the economy, and North Korea in good shape, I don't know how he loses.



How has social media influenced persuasion?

I've argued that power in this era could be defined by the size of the platform multiplied by how persuasive the person using it is. When you've got 50-some million Twitter followers, as the President does, and a full toolbox of persuasion, this is what you get. You don't have to like it. But Trump moves things like nobody's ever moved anything. And it's because of those two elements.

There used to be a limit to your audience regardless of how persuasive you were. Those days are over. I think Twitter will remain a dominant platform because of the density of reporters. Even if most of the public is on Facebook, ultimately Facebook echoes the media. Influencers on Twitter influence the media, and the media influence other social networks. Then it feeds back to the people. Influential individuals now have a kind of power that is unprecedented.



Above, a Dilbert comic strip that typifies Adams' humor, parodying the absurd, illogical nature of modern working life. The first Dilbert comic strip was published in April 1989. Almost three decades later, the comic remains widely syndicated, appearing in 2,000 newspapers worldwide across 65 countries. Below, Mr. Adams was a guest of President Trump, shown here in the Oval Office.

"THE SINGLE HIGHEST FORM OF PERSUASION IN THE CORPORATE SETTING IS WHAT I CALL THE 'HIGH-GROUND MANEUVER.'"

What techniques can business leaders learn from President Trump, even if begrudgingly?

The biggest lesson is the way our visual sense dominates. You saw that clearly with the photos of detained children in the US being kept in cages. As soon as those images emerged, that debate was over.

The other lessons are simplicity and repetition. The president does these so well that early on people imagined he was mentally deficient. The experts in the campaign would say, "My God, he's speaking in a sixth grade vocabulary and he just keeps repeating himself." I was the first to say, "You're totally missing the story. This is grade-A nuclear persuasion." The question is, why aren't the other candidates doing it?

The president also frames issues well. He controls focus and energy. He'll take the energy off of the thing that his critics want to talk about and put it on to the thing that he wants. The first time I saw him do it, and the moment I realized something was going on, was during the first Republican debate in August 2015 – the Rosie O'Donnell moment.

That was when Megyn Kelly asked Mr. Trump about the insulting names he had called women?

Right. That question would have ended any normal politician. They would either apologize and be dead, or deny it and they'd be dead.

Trump found path number three. He interrupted Kelly and claimed he'd said all those things "only about Rosie O'Donnell." And what he did was he took all the energy away from the question and moved it to an answer that wasn't even related to the question really. It was a joke.

Because "only Rosie O'Donnell" was a visual response and she already had a lot of negative feeling among his base – who were the only ones he was talking to during the primaries – that became the headline the next day. It was outrageous. And then he went on to say something about how he doesn't



like political correctness, which inoculated him for the rest of his campaign. Once he said, “I’m the guy who doesn’t respect political correctness,” then every time he acted like that guy, he was just being consistent with what he promised.

How could this tactic be applied appropriately in a business setting?

Well, you can move the energy to the positive thing. It doesn’t matter where you move it. It just has to be emotional and capture our imagination.

But the single highest form of persuasion in the corporate setting is what I call the “high-ground maneuver.” It involves getting out of the weeds where people can’t agree and taking it to a higher level where people have to follow you to that level; they’d feel foolish if they stayed in the weeds.

Steve Jobs was the king of this. Do you remember “antennagate”? It was in 2010, when the iPhone 4 was having reception issues.

Imagine you’re making a product that’s meant to be held in the hand. And the only time it won’t work was when you held it in your hand. I’m simplifying it a bit, but it could not have been a worse flaw. Apple was getting killed on it.

Jobs solved that entire problem, ended it in fact, with only a few sentences.

He used the high-ground maneuver. And I know it was an intentional move because I wrote a blog post about it. According to Walter Isaacson’s biography, apparently Jobs passed my blog post around to his staff to show them what he had done.

Instead of saying, “It’s not that bad,” which would be in the weeds, or, “Just get over it,” Jobs took it up a level and said, “All smartphones have problems.” And then he proposed a reasonable solution. The next day, all the stories were about the problems facing smartphones in general, rather than the problem specific to Apple.

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EMILY LIBRESCO is an Account Researcher. She is based in Brunswick’s New York office.

Everyone wanted smartphones, and once they realized that all smartphones had problems, Apple was inoculated.

He did all that with one frickin’ sentence, which is why he was Steve Jobs and we’re not.

Do you believe the workplace has become more humane since you started drawing Dilbert?

Some things are clearly better. More people can work at home. Family-leave policies seem to be improving. Things are much better in terms of gender equality and diversity.

But I would say – and it’s an observation that could be biased by selective data – when I was younger, I didn’t know of anybody who was suffering from the problems that are almost universal now. And technology is a big part of that. It’s designed to spike certain parts of our brain. That’s why we’re sort of exhausted, frustrated and having all kinds of feelings that our poorly evolved human brains are not designed to handle.

If you take that unhealthy headspace and combine it with fairly unhealthy physical situations – either in cubicles or open floors, which are just bad in different ways – then I’m not really sure.

Do you see business taking more responsibility for social issues, such as climate change, income inequality or gun control?

Companies have to balance their fiduciary responsibilities and the fact that they should be good citizens of the world. Most companies will stay away from commenting on topics they can stay away from. But they absolutely have to satisfy their employees.

In this day and age, companies need to be as inclusive and as diverse as they can be, partially because they don’t have any choice, and partially because it’s just smart business. ♦