

Seven Communication Rules For The Debt Super Committee

by Stephanie Nora White and Rebecca Theim, Wixted Pope Nora Thompson & Associates



Stephanie Nora White



Rebecca Theim

Six Democratic and six Republican senators, are at work at a task that is possibly the most challenging of their political careers: devise a way to cut at least \$1.2 trillion from the federal deficit in a manner both political parties can live with.

Committee members were pressed into service following the summer deliberations over raising the federal debt ceiling, a vitriolic and hyper-partisan dispute that provoked widespread voter rancor and disgust.

As committee members continue their deliberations toward their Nov. 23 deadline, what lessons should they take away from the earlier debt ceiling debate debacle?

We asked business, political and communications experts to weigh in.

Their advice is not only valuable to the debt super committee, but equally useful to any business person facing a difficult negotiation.

Rule #1: No leaks. “Leaks damage trust,” said Matt Mackowiak, president of Potomac Strategy Group, LLC, a Washington, D.C.- and Austin, Tex.-based political consultancy.

“This is going to be hard enough if they trust each other; it’s going to be even harder if they don’t.”

If super committee members are at a loss as to how to enforce a “no leaks” rule, they should take a lesson from the private sector, said Charlie Leonard, partner at Washington, D.C.-based public affairs consultancy Chlopak, Leonard and Schecter.

They should agree to maintain the same SEC-mandated code of confidentiality public company executives must abide by when involved in sensitive corporate negotiations “with real penalties for freelancing,” Leonard said.

“First and foremost, you don’t go out and talk about the terms of the transaction in the media.”

Rule #2: Ban ultimatums. “Anytime any party takes the ‘my way or the highway position,’ they really don’t care if anything is accomplished,” said Bob Ciaruffoli, CEO of ParenteBeard, a Philadelphia-headquartered CPA and business advisory firm.

“Sometimes that position makes sense, but probably not when we’re talking about the financial future of the country.”

Ann Tenbrunsel, author and professor of business ethics at the University of Notre Dame’s Mendoza College of Business, agreed. “Making ultimatums – ‘we will never touch Social Security’ or ‘we will never increase spending’ – backs the negotiator into a corner.”

Doing away with ultimatums also opens the doors for tradeoffs, a cornerstone of sound negotiation. The two “parties need to first prioritize their issues – what do they care most about – and then look for tradeoffs where both can claim a victory,” Tenbrunsel said.

Trade-offs can be far more effective than compromise because they make it possible for both sides to secure one of their top priorities, while conceding items they value less. Compromise, on the other hand, often involves “‘meeting in the middle’ and getting a little on every issue you wanted, which leaves everyone worse off,” Tenbrunsel added.

Rule #3: “Don’t just do something; stand there,” advised Leonard, who previously served as national campaign director of the National Republican Congressional Committee. “The more you talk, the more you box yourself into a negotiating position you don’t want to be in.”

The benefits of keeping quiet and listening extend beyond not tipping your negotiating hand, Tenbrunsel said. Really listening to the other side is often the path to a successful outcome, she said. “It’s not he or she who talks the most who wins, but he or she who understands both parties’ perspectives and is smart enough to find a creative solution” who does.

Rule #4: Content, not oratory, must prevail (but labels can matter). “By stressing rhetoric over substance, it’s no wonder that so little was achieved from the initial debt ceiling debate,” said Keld Jensen, an associate professor at the Copenhagen Business School and managing director of MarketWatch Centre for Negotiation. The two sides of the debt super committee need to have “an accurate understanding of their starting points, targets, overall objectives and thresholds for pain.”

Having said that, words are powerful and labels ultimately can make a difference in the outcome. The super committee likely can ensure more successful and expedient results by how it chooses to label its work, said J. David Cisneros, assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Boston’s Northeastern University.

“In any kind of interaction like this, part of what the group does is frame the problem, and the way you frame the problem suggests solutions,” he said. Examples of such “rhetorical framing” are “cuts to entitlements” versus “cuts to the social safety net,” or “everyone paying their fair share” versus “excessively taxing job creators.” “Is there a way the committee can frame the problem to facilitate a solution?” Cisneros asked.

Rule #5: Get outside help. Tapping independent experts can both instill some much-needed discipline into the group’s deliberations and give members political cover when the inevitable politically unpopular outcome occurs. “In a negotiation, it’s always helpful to have people involved who don’t have a dog in the fight,” Leonard said.

Rule #6: Be the first to cooperate. Individual members of a group like the debt super committee often fall prey to the “sucker effect,” in which no one wants to be the sucker who cooperates when everyone else is intent on competing.

But “by signaling your intention to cooperate and having everyone else commit to do the same, the ground can be laid for creative solutions,” Tenbrunsel said. “Given the frustration and disgust of the American people, this could potentially be a winning strategy for the politician who starts the cycle of cooperation.”

Rule #7: Make a connection. Much has been made of the flagging camaraderie on Capitol Hill between the two dominant political parties and what that has meant to Congress’ ability to come together and compromise at critical times. The super committee should strive to recapture some of the collegiality of Congressional days past and forge a real bond among members.

“The phrase ‘all business is human’ still stands,” Jensen said. “Negotiations have a far greater chance of succeeding if a partnership is formed between all parties.

Instead of looking at the negotiation as combat, the super committee should look at it as a joint project where the overall goal is to achieve a solution better than both parties initially thought possible.”