

Define the Win

Two people can agree completely on a goal and still spend an hour arguing — because they never agreed on what the goal actually was.

Ask two people what they want from immigration policy and both might say "a fair, functional system." Ask two people what they want from health care and both might say "people shouldn't go bankrupt getting treated." Ask two people what they want from the economy and both might say "everyone should have a shot."

They agree. And then they start arguing anyway — about solutions, about which bill, which spending level, which regulation — without ever noticing that "a fair, functional system" means something different to each of them.

Define the win asks a question that usually gets skipped: before we argue about how to get there, do we even agree on what "there" looks like?

Solutions Without a Destination

Most political arguments start in the wrong place. They start with a solution — a bill, a policy, a court ruling — and work backward into a fight about whether that solution is good.

But "is this solution good" is unanswerable without first answering "good at achieving what, exactly, and how would we know if it worked?"

Take a debate over a proposal to speed up permitting for new housing construction. One side argues it will finally bring housing costs down by letting supply catch up with demand. The other argues it will fill a neighborhood with expensive new units that do nothing for the people already struggling to afford rent there. Both sides might even use the same word — "affordable" — to describe what they're after. But notice: neither side has said what the win actually is. Is the win "more total housing units built, which lowers prices region-wide over time"? Is it "the specific people currently priced out of this specific neighborhood can afford to stay"? Those aren't the same finish line, even though both get called "housing affordability."

Until that's named, the two sides aren't really disagreeing about the policy. They're disagreeing about an unstated goal, using the policy as a proxy.

Two people can support the exact same bill for incompatible reasons — or oppose the exact same bill because they're each measuring it against a different, unspoken finish line.

Why Skipping This Step Feels Efficient (and Isn't)

Naming the win first feels slow. It feels like a delay before the "real" argument — the one about the actual bill, the actual number, the actual policy.

But skipping it doesn't save time. It just moves the disagreement to a place where it can never be resolved, because both sides are debating solutions while quietly assuming different goals, and neither side knows it.

That's how arguments turn into stalemates that never move: not because people can't find common ground, but because they never located what they were actually trying to agree on in the first place.

A Practical Version of the Question

Before wading into the next debate over a policy, it helps to ask a smaller, sharper version of "what's the win":

If this succeeds, what does that actually look like — and how would we know?

Not a slogan. Not "fixing the system." An actual observable outcome. A number, a condition, a state of affairs that could be checked later.

If you can't answer that for your own position, it's worth pausing before arguing solutions at all. And if you can answer it, it's worth asking the same question of whoever's on the other side of the debate — because the honest answer might reveal you were never as far apart as the shouting suggested.

Sometimes defining the win reveals real disagreement — genuinely different values about what matters most. That's fine. That's an actual disagreement, worth having honestly.

But often, it reveals something else: two people who wanted the same thing, arguing about a solution neither of them had bothered to explain, because they'd skipped straight past the only question that would have told them whether they agreed.