

Persuasion

When You Talk, Say Something



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Introduction

Persuasion haunts our lives. Whether rudely accosting, vaguely perceived or entirely invisible, this ghost is always lurking nearby. Every waking moment, someone is trying to get us to think something, do something, or buy something. If we have a moment's peace, it's because those who want to reach us haven't figured out how to. Even then, they are in our heads, beckoning from our unconscious minds, fomenting longing, suggesting that we should feel needy or guilty or unfulfilled.

We are all caught up in this dance, sometimes leading, sometimes following, teaching or learning or watching in spite of ourselves from the sidelines. If we refuse to be persuaded, great opportunities will be lost forever. The great currents of our times will sweep committed sailors gloriously onward while we languish in life's brackish shallows. If we are persuaded too easily, we will follow madcap fools over the falls. Without persuasion, leadership is impossible. But oppressive persuaders fatigue those around them and lose their effectiveness.

This paper seeks to put persuasion in perspective. As a leader, persuasion is a skill you must master—at least to some degree. That is to say, you must be able to persuade others and you must respond competently when others seek to persuade you. The practical ideas that follow may assist you in becoming more persuasive when you need to be, less annoying than you might be, and more discriminating and less gullible. Then again, some of these ideas may prove worthless. But you will never know unless you try them out. Are you inclined or disinclined to read on? Either way, you have just been persuaded.

Take persuasion seriously

Persuasion is dangerous. In the wrong hands, it can do real harm. Unrecognized or ignored, it leads clueless souls astray. From the impulsive purchases we later regret to the disastrous liaisons that ruin our lives forever, persuasion is the thin ice on which we continuously skate. Organizational leaders persuade others to go along with harebrained schemes that eventually maim the company. Mindless conformists recruit the like mindless to join the latest consultant-herded lemming march to the sea. Most of our serious personal and professional mistakes can be traced to our failure to give persuasion the respect it deserves.

Don't be too easily persuaded. Try to figure out what the persuaders in your face really want. It may not be in anyone's best interests but their own. When you are feeling pressured to make a commitment quickly or to agree before you have given the matter adequate consideration, muster the courage

to be the reviled stick-in-the-mud. Your responsible hesitation may save you and your organization from a painful mistake.

The opportunity to persuade others is a serious obligation. It will have important consequences. Your credibility is at stake. Never persuade lightly. Remind yourself that others will hold you accountable for their decisions, commitments and the consequences they suffer even if that is not entirely fair.

Evaluate your need to persuade

Convincing listeners of the unrecognized crisis at hand is a favorite ploy of panting evangelists and scheming zealots the world over. They know that they must first make others feel uncomfortable before they can demand impulsive enlistment in their cause. Desperate persuaders are always suspect even when they are effective. An emotional appeal from an aroused persuader usually means the case itself is not that strong. A preacher once made this note in the margin of his sermon outline: "Shout loud here. Point is weak."

Why do you feel that it is so critical that others adopt your point of view? When you find yourself desperate to persuade others quickly, it usually means that you feel threatened in some way. Identify the needs that are driving your sense of urgency. Are you concerned that others won't see you as a leader if you don't lead continuously? Are you jealous of other leaders' successes? Are you trying to minimize previous leadership failures by launching a new, distracting initiative? Facing your selfish urges before you begin a persuasive effort may spare you the embarrassment of having your true motives exposed in the minds of your listeners. Remember that most of the crowd never mentioned the emperor had no clothes on. They just went along and laughed about his foolishness later.

Be persuaded yourself

Organizational leaders frequently go off half-cocked. Someone in authority reads a new book, attends a seminar, has an idea or decides to "take charge." Court sycophants make haste to show what loyal subjects they are by enthusiastically preaching their lord's shallow gospel, seeking converts before they have decided whether it really is a cause worth joining. Someone asks a few thoughtful questions that reveal what a stupid idea this is. Executives, embarrassed but none the wiser, retreat to the Board Room to bemoan the disloyalty and resistance of the masses while the workers shake their heads and wonder anew how such idiots ever fell into positions of organizational leadership.

Risk being viewed as a troublemaker by taking the time to ask the hard questions before you sign up. Take a hard look at the package, stripped of its emotional cover. Make sure you understand the case for and against the initiative before you start trying to sell it.

Ask how this project relates to the company's strategic plan. In particular, inquire about which current projects will be abandoned to make way for this new program. Identify other soldiers who will take the hill with you. Ask yourself whether the relationship capital you will have expended in taking this hill will have been worth it when you get to the top.

Prepare to persuade

Effective persuasion begins with careful preparation. More than a few leaders stumble onto a new issue, make a snap judgment and start selling their views right away. For many strident persuaders, the attempt to persuade others is a way to convince themselves that they are right. The position doesn't

matter as much as whether others go along with them.

Write down the points that you want to make. Prepare for the questions that the skeptics are sure to ask. Practice your delivery in the mirror or ask a friend to critique your approach. You won't be effective if you attempt to persuade others when you feel resentful, desperate or angry. Admit up front that honorable people disagree about this issue; uncertain persuaders often adopt a tone and manner that suggests that only a fool would take another view. Remind yourself that people will pay more attention to what you have to say after they invite your input, and that the more you talk the less others are likely to listen.

Choose the right moment

Timing matters. On awakening, just before falling asleep, during a favorite TV program, or when either of you is angry, rushed or preoccupied are poor times to persuade your spouse. We often choose equally poor times at work. We attack during times of excess emotion, driven by our need to make a point, flogging repetitively, venting our spleens, heedless of the damage we are causing to relationships vital to our long-term success.

We all speak admiringly of those "teachable moments" with our children when we sense that their minds and hearts are prepared, fleetingly pried open by some arresting emotion or singular circumstance. Now is the moment to say or do something that will make a difference. This is the time to speak softly and be heard.

It is easier to create persuadable moments than you might think. Emphasize that the other person is important to you. Make it clear that you are engaged. Acknowledge that the receipt of another's undivided attention—if only for a moment—is a treasured gift. Strike a pleasant emotional note with your sincerity and, when you see the opening, make your case quickly. Invite reflection and select a time to revisit the issue. If you are sincere, if you are prepared and if you don't overdo it, you will be very persuasive.

Ask permission to persuade

Aspiring persuaders often fail to tag first base in their eagerness to make it home. Persons who are persuaded against their will usually reconsider their hasty commitments, and they may come to resent your unwelcome intrusion and heavy-handedness. The sales ambush does sometimes work, but not many of us look forward to unsolicited telemarketing calls or count these opportunistic trespassers as our friends. In most organizations and in life, it is the long-

term relationship—not the individual sale—that matters.

“May I make my case?” “Thank you for allowing me to try to sell you on this.” “I’m trying to sell my point of view here.” These frank admissions make it clear that you are not trying to slip something over on others. Your audience will always appreciate your honesty. You are now less likely to offend them before you’ve had the chance to make your case. Once they have agreed to hear you out, they are less likely to tune you out.

Focus on the common ground

It is so tempting to focus on differences. Criticizing others offers welcome relief from the torturing awareness of our own shortcomings. Identifying the flaws in others and having comrades agree with us always makes us feel better about ourselves—for the moment. For these reasons, anxious persuaders are eager to point out the flaws in the opposing argument or, even worse, the personal shortcomings of those espousing opposing views.

It is important to find some common ground. Since it is the foundation of every successful persuasion, there is no point in going on until you have found it. Recall shared history. Discuss mutual interests. Summarize the principles you both agree on. Identify common goals. Even the bitterest organizational combatants can find some common ground if they put their minds to it.

Make a compelling case

This is the most important element in persuading successfully; it’s the hardest to do and it is the aspect of persuasion that is least often given the attention and effort it deserves. Doing this part right requires that you think and work—two things that most of us don’t long to do. Making a compelling case also requires us to forsake comfortable assumptions, abandon passionate convictions, smother emotional defenses and to take an objective look at the weaknesses in the argument we intend to make. Such things don’t come naturally.

A compelling case for a position usually involves carefully researched and credible facts, expert opinions, the arguments for the proposal and a rebuttal of the arguments against it.

To be compelling, all of this information must be presented in an unemotional way that encourages

your listeners to draw their own conclusions. If you find yourself making an emotional appeal full of fire and brimstone, you probably don’t have much of a case to start with. If you are reluctant to face criticism of your point of view, you have neglected to consider the issue adequately. If you expect to persuade others without making a compelling case, you have taken the lazy approach many others before you have used with little success.

Persuade ethically

Most of us long to be persuaded. We have needs. We want someone or something to satisfy the longings that drive us. Thirsty and hopeful, we lunge at the nearest mirage again and again. Seeing this, persuaders—ethical and unethical—keep doing what works. They keep discovering new ways to reach us, to awaken needs we didn’t know we had, to make us crave and to elicit commitments that slake their thirst for persuasive success. To most persuaders, the end justifies the means. Nowhere in the world is persuasion as an ultimate goal pursued and glorified the way it is in America.

This environment encourages unethical persuasion. When you persuade others and they don’t realize that they are being persuaded, that is unethical. When you make it appear that others have no choice but to go along with you, that is unethical. When you exploit a hidden weakness, withhold important information, lie or intimidate to get what you want, that is unethical. It happens everyday. For the slick persuader, it is as easy as taking candy from a child. Be forewarned. You may get your way in the short run, but the abundant harvest of resentment and mistrust that springs from manipulation selfishly sown will destroy the trust that supports the meaningful relationships in our lives.

There is a better way. Inform others when you are attempting to persuade them. Make the case and admit that other views exist. Tell them what is in it for you. Invite them to reflect on the issues instead of making an impulsive commitment they might later regret and repudiate. Thank them for the opportunity to make your case, and ask for the chance to try to sell them later on. Don’t make their adoption of your views a test of your friendship and mutual respect.

Persuade partially

You may be tempted to take an all-or-nothing approach to persuading others. Highly competitive persuaders, craving control, want it all. Any concession is viewed as weakness, a shameful compromise. These tormented and tormenting persuaders will not concede a single point. If the opposition is not entirely vanquished, smoldering opposition might blaze

up, melting their false sense of domination. Such persuaders are annoyingly persistent, remarkably inflexible and chronically dissatisfied for this reason—they fail most of the time.

Not only is compromise honorable and its satisfactions considerable, it is a plateau more easily and frequently reached, a base of renewal for a later assault on the summit.

There is a better strategy. If you adopt it, you will be a more successful persuader and your life will be more satisfying. Don't try to bite off the whole piece at once. Focus on one aspect of your argument and build solid support for that piece first. Then move to the next piece of your argument and begin making the case for it. When you see that you will not be able to get everything you want, instead of pouting and feeling like a failure, celebrate your partial success and view the rest of the objective as a challenge to be pursued at a later time. Not only is compromise honorable and its satisfactions considerable, it is a plateau more easily and frequently reached, a base of renewal for a later assault on the summit. And the opposition you encounter in your daily attempts to persuade will sometimes save you from the embarrassment of getting to the top of your ladder only to realize that it was leaning against the wrong wall.

Persuade tentatively

The longing to take comfort in the delusion that you are completely right and everybody else is entirely wrong is not limited to religious fundamentalists. Because those in authority can usually get away with it, managers are more inclined to succumb to this temptation than are the untitled workers of the world. If you are the boss, you may attempt to persuade from this point of view. Particularly with your subordinates, you may think you can demand compliance by taking the tone that it will be your way or the highway. It won't work. In many cases, your employees possess technical skills that could land them a better paying job tomorrow. Dictator-managers who have lost their technical edge are a dime a dozen. Empowered associates are no more inclined to swallow what you dish out unquestioningly than are your peers and superiors.

Because of this reality, you will bring others along more successfully if you treat them as volunteers and persuade them tentatively. Asking questions instead of making categorical statements is a good start. Inviting their input about what the important issues are and how they should be

approached is more effective than beginning with a prescribed solution. Building consensus about initial assumptions by encouraging others to modify your tentative conclusions is more effective in the long run than beginning with a summation that will often be perceived as a gauntlet to be challenged instead of a goal to be adopted. "Given what we heard at last week's seminar, I'm wondering if it's not time to reconsider our admission process. What do you all think?" Such a tentative approach is much more likely to be successful than announcing, "It is time to reconsider our admission process."

Persuade judiciously

Don't you get tired of hearing the same people all of the time? Have you considered that others get tired of hearing you all the time too? Even the best persuaders run the danger of overdoing it. We all know intense exhibitionists who have an opinion about every issue, superior experience in every situation and the unflinching intention to impose their wisdom at every opportunity. You can't get them to be quiet. Even if they are right, you find yourself disagreeing just to break the monotony.

It is not enough to keep your mouth shut though that is undeniably a good first step. You must not only pick your issues judiciously, you must give others the opportunity to persuade too. How else will they learn to be effective persuaders? Listen carefully to the arguments they advance and support them when you can. If the issue is not that critical, concede graciously and compliment them on making the case. The good will you create in the group by demonstrating that you can be persuaded too will grease the wheels on the invisible little red wagons that all of us still pull behind us everyday of our lives.

Persuade repetitively

You have made your case. You have talked to all the key people and they have listened. Since no opposition was forthcoming, your job is now done and you can proceed with the proposed changes and everyone will be happy, right? Wrong.

All of us need to be persuaded repeatedly. When we first hear about a proposal, we usually do not realize exactly how it will affect us until we start to implement the change. Tuning out most of what is going on around us is a major coping strategy in today's information jungle. You are not likely to cut through this defense the first time. First, you have to get their attention. Next, you must make it clear to your colleagues why your issue is important to them. Then you must explain why they should make it a priority when they are already overwhelmed. Now, you need to tell them exactly what they need to do and when they need to do it. Finally, you will

need to see whether they actually understood and extract a firm commitment that they will follow through. Stumble on any of these steps—and you will—and you have to start all over. Recognizing that you cannot usually expect others to invest themselves to this degree in attempting to help you communicate your message, you can see why repetition is one of the few reliable techniques at your disposal.

Use market forces to your advantage

People are most receptive to the idea of change when something has made them uncomfortable. The prospect of change triggers dreadful resistance when we are coasting along comfortably but, the more miserable we are, the more open we become to the idea of changing something. Uncomfortable as it is, change now offers some hope that we can feel better. If we are miserable enough, the risk of change may be worth it.

You can begin your attempts to persuade by making others miserable, but that is not the recommended approach. Instead, look for the things in the environment that are making folks miserable and use these noxious stimuli to your advantage. Suppose that the government has just come out with some new regulations that have induced fear and loathing. Jump on the bandwagon in a big way. Agree that the regulations are just awful, but use the unsettled atmosphere these new regulations have created to push for some organizational change that will conform to the regulations, and that you secretly thought were good ideas all along. If you had pushed for these changes before the regulations were announced, just because they were good ideas, you would have been chased away from the water cooler.

Identify and address perceived needs

Needy people are easy to persuade. Religious cults flourish because exploitative leaders are adept at recruiting needy persons and making them feel even more needy. These demagogues then strive to convince their needy victims that only the cult can meet their needs. This is a sobering and cautionary tale, but even ethical persuaders must understand and exploit the power of perceived needs if they expect to be successful. In the organizational environment, we often don't realize that we are needy or what our needs are. This is a golden opportunity for the talented persuader. Everyone needs something. If you can figure out what that something is and you can offer some balm for the psychic sore you have uncovered, you will have created an opportunity to persuade effectively, build relationships and promote personal and organizational growth.

View persuasion as an investment

Misleading used car salesmen and hawking evangelists have given persuasion a bad name. Unethical persuaders of all kinds want to get what they want at others' expense. They are not interested in a long-term, mutually respectful relationship. They want to score and move on to the next mark.

Such an approach has no place in organizational life. When others give you the opportunity to persuade them, it is a gift. If you conduct yourself honorably, make a reasonable case, acknowledge the weaknesses in your argument, and give them the chance to consider and question, you will emerge as a credible persuader and you will be invited to persuade again. The reputation as an ethical and trustworthy persuader is an organizational title painstakingly earned and easily lost.

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Admit the weaknesses in your case. Inexperienced and unethical persuaders, desperate to make the sale at all costs, are reluctant to admit the weaknesses in their arguments. Determined to extract an impulsive commitment quickly, they correctly suspect that thoughtful reflection may slow their persuasive momentum and deprive them of the kill. Because so much can be learned from the flawed persuasive techniques that have turned you off, you should reflect on these failed strategies so you can avoid making the same mistakes in your attempts to persuade others.

Inviting those you are attempting to persuade to poke holes in your argument is not the typical approach. But taking that tack will convince your teammates that you are serious about finding the best solution, even if you are not the one to think of it. It will make it clear that you are more interested in doing the right thing than just getting your way. In the information age, the best idea is the goal. A temporary interpersonal victory that falls short of the competitive advantage that real innovation and genuine commitment provide is a hollow victory indeed. Inviting others to find the weaknesses in

your argument is the only way to take persuasion to the level of organizational learning where it really belongs.

Be open to effective rebuttal

When you buy into an idea and start to sell it to others, it is understandable that you would become emotionally invested in your position and that you would not be thrilled by the prospect of rebuttal. Rebuttal is frequently perceived as a personal attack, a rejection of the persuader and not just his or her argument.

Those who challenge your positions won't always do so in the most gracious way, and it is easy to overlook the value of rebuttal when you feel you are under attack.

Even the harshest rebuttal is valuable though. It clarifies what you are up against. You may not have known where the opposition would come from or how intense it would be. Others' reactions to the rebuttal will clarify how much support you can expect.

In this way, open rebuttal is like a kind of trial vote—useful in your future planning. Be sure to thank your critics for taking a public position instead of cowardly undermining your efforts behind your back.

Give something in return

When you have persuaded others to support your position, you have placed yourself in their debt. If they can't count on your support in return, they will be less receptive to your persuasive charms in the future. This shouldn't be so hard to remember, but it is a fundamental lesson persuaders sometimes take too long to learn.

Thank them for their support. Make it clear that you could not hope to succeed without them. A written note of appreciation is a nice touch. Inviting them to call on you in their time of need will make it clear that you appreciate the sacrifice they have made. If they have taken a tough stand that is unpopular and costly, let them know what their leadership means to you personally. Effective persuasion is not about getting your way; it is about your way of getting.

Admit it when you are wrong

The victory celebration is not the icing on the persuasive cake. Having the maturity to admit that you were wrong when the future doesn't play out as you predicted is the hallmark of the great organizational persuader. What do you want folks to remember the next time you come to them with an issue—that you were wrong the last time you approached them, or that you were wrong and had the guts to admit it? You can bet that they are going to remember one of these things. No matter how earnest or prepared, all persuaders will sometimes turn out to have been misguided or mistaken. Our colleagues don't expect us to be infallible, but they do expect us to be unassuming.

Conclusion

Persuasion is an essential leadership skill. Persuasion is hard work. It takes patience and practice. Some of us are better natural persuaders, but all of us can and should improve. The practical guidelines in this paper can serve as a modest foundation for your efforts to improve.

All relationships involve persuasion. The way you persuade others will influence the way others regard you, how much they trust you and whether they will follow you.

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