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LEADING THROUGH PERSUASION

“Today you have to appeal to people by helping them see how they can get from here to there, by establishing some credibility, and by giving them some reason and help to get there. Do all those things, and they’ll knock down doors.”

Larry Bossidy, former chairman of the board of Honeywell International, Inc.

Persuasion involves leading people to take a position they don’t currently hold—a skill for success in both personal and business relationships. You must not only make a rational argument, but also position your information, ideas, approaches and/or solutions in ways that appeal to basic human emotions.

Persuasion blends art (establishing trust) and science (collecting and analyzing information, understanding human behavior, developing communication skills). It takes preparation and planning, which cover four essential steps:

1. Establish credibility
2. Understand your audience, framing your goals in a way that identifies common ground.
3. Reinforce your positions with vivid language and compelling evidence.
4. Connect emotionally with your audience.

Effective persuasion may prove difficult and time-consuming, but it is ultimately the most powerful style of managing people. To avoid failure, your strategy for persuasion must be as compelling as your arguments.



Four Steps to Successful Persuasion

1. The Importance of Credibility: Credibility develops from two sources: expertise and relationships. You demonstrate trustworthiness and integrity when you have a solid track record of sound judgment and prove to be knowledgeable about your proposals.

To build trust, you must encourage colleagues to explore ideas with you. Listen carefully to their suggestions, and establish an environment in which they know their opinions are valued. Prepare by collecting data and information that both support and contradict your arguments—a step that sheds light on your position's strengths and weaknesses.

As for relationships, credible leaders consistently demonstrate they will listen intently and work toward everyone's best interests. They exhibit a strong character and the utmost integrity by being honest, steady and reliable. When relationships are genuine, leaders will more likely enjoy the benefit of the doubt. Place others' best interests first so you can validate that you truly care about the team's well-being.

2. Frame for Common Ground: Even with established credibility, you still must appeal strongly to those you're trying to persuade. You must be adept at describing your positions in ways that illuminate their advantages.

The primary goal is to identify tangible benefits to which your targeted audience can relate. This requires multiple conversations, meetings and dialogue to collect essential information by asking thoughtful questions. This process will often prompt you to alter your initial argument or include compromises.

Identify key decision makers, stakeholders and the organization's network of influence. Who is supportive, unyielding or neutral? Pinpoint their interests and how they view alternatives.

3. Provide Evidence: Once credibility and a frame for common ground are established, persuasion comes down to presenting the evidence: strong data in multiple forms (stories, graphs, images, metaphors and examples). Make your position come alive by using vivid language that complements graphics. People retain visual information and emotionally charged stories.

In most cases, a rock-solid argument:

- Is logical and consistent with facts and experience
- Favorably addresses your audience's interests
- Eliminates or neutralizes competing alternatives
- Recognizes and deals with office politics
- Receives endorsements from objective, authoritative third parties



4. Connect Emotionally: Your connection to your audience must demonstrate both intellectual and emotional commitment to your position. Act too emotionally and people may doubt your clear-headedness. Remain too reserved and they'll doubt your allegiance and passion.

Successful persuaders also cultivate an accurate sense of their audience's emotional state, and they adjust their arguments' tone accordingly. This is called "emotional resonance," and proficient persuaders enjoy a definite advantage. Whatever your position, you must match your emotional fervor to your audience's ability to receive your message.

No effort to persuade will succeed without emotion, but showing too much is as unproductive as showing too little. To overcome the obstacles, you must match your emotions to your audience's.

Four Ways to Fail at Persuasion

When trying to achieve their audience's buy-in, most leaders attempt to persuade through logic, persistence and personal enthusiasm. In reality, this model is a setup for failure. You will blunder when you:

1. Make your case with a hard sell. You may be tempted to strongly state your position at the outset, incorporating persistence, logic and exuberance to force your ideas upon your audience. But assailing colleagues with preconceived ideas from the get-go gives potential opponents a clear target for battle.

2. Resist compromise. Too many leaders view compromise as surrender, but it is an essential element in constructive persuasion. Before people buy into your proposal, they want to see if you are flexible enough to respond to their concerns. Compromises often lead to more sustainable solutions.

3. Think the secret of persuasion lies in presenting great arguments. Great arguments matter—no doubt about it. But your credibility—as well as your ability to create a mutually beneficial framework, connect on the right emotional level and communicate through vivid language that makes arguments come alive—are equally important.



4. Assume persuasion is a one-shot effort. Persuasion is a process, not an event. It's rarely possible to arrive at a shared solution on the first try. More often than not, persuasion involves listening to people, testing a position, developing a new position that reflects group input, testing yet again, incorporating compromises and then trying once more. This may seem like an arduous process—and, indeed, it is. But if you want to persuade and achieve lasting results, it is most assuredly worth your time, energy and effort.

Persuasion has been historically perceived as a skill reserved for sales and negotiation. Now, it's an essential proficiency for all leaders. For more information about taking your leadership skills to the next level, contact me at Mary@wernercoaching.com.

Resources

- Conger, J.A. (May–June 1998) "The Necessary Art of Persuasion." Reprint 98304. *Harvard Business Review*. Boston MA.
- Conger, J.A. (1998) *Winning 'Em Over: A New Model for Management in the Age of Persuasion*. Simon & Schuster. New York NY.
- Fisher, R. & Ury, W. (1991) *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. Second Ed. Penguin Books. New York NY.
- Getting People On Board*. (2005) The Results-Driven Manager Series. Harvard Business School Press. Boston MA.
- Power, Influence, and Persuasion: Sell Your Ideas and Make Things Happen*. (2005) Harvard Business Essentials. Harvard Business School Press. Boston MA.

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