

A Rhetorical Approach to Persuasion: An Overview

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We live and work in a world where persuasion is an essential skill for almost all of us. It is a feature not only of our professional and business lives, but of our domestic ones, as well. It can range from ordinary situations like trying to convince your partner to see a particular movie, to sending our children to a specific school, right across the board to more professional situations such as convincing our company directors to accept a new product line or policy. We need to sell our ideas and points of view, products, services, policies, and, in a strange way, our own talents and reputations. Persuasion is an all-pervasive aspect of all of our lives.

So it is not surprising recruiters in the Wall Street-Harris Interactive Survey ranking of critical business skills, put communication and interpersonal skills in top place, and the ability to work well within a team in second place. Indeed, these two skills were even put above those of analysis and problem solving. Today, good oral communication skills are not the prerogative of the political or business elite; they are everybody’s business, simply because in today’s society we depend on our interactive skills more than in previous generations. We all need to communicate effectively, but it is often difficult.

It is difficult when we consider that each one of us has our own individual goals and perceptions. It is little wonder that our goals are often at cross-purposes with those of others. It is also little wonder that our perceptions of events, facts and people don’t always match. Persuasion is our only means of getting others to see things our way or at least get their cooperation to accomplish our goals.

This is not only true in our interpersonal relations but also in public life. The modern Western democratic system of government, for example, cannot exist without persuasion; politicians must be free to persuade others as to the rightness of their policies. This is what democratic politics is all about. People want to be informed about what concerns them. If change has to take place, they need to know why. Political leaders like Tony Blair or Bill Clinton, irrespective of whether or not we agree with them, have superb oral communication skills, just as Jack Kennedy, Winston Churchill, Helmut Kohl and many other political leaders did in previous generations.

The Art of Persuasion

Persuasion is like a contract in common law, where both sides need to gain something, although not necessarily in equal proportions. The experts tell us, and probably our own experience will confirm it, that we will usually respond to a persuasive act that promises to satisfy some of our needs or desires.

The authors, Jowett and O'Donnell, tell us that “*persuasion is interactive and attempts to satisfy the needs of both parties.*”¹

According to these experts, it involves the persuader, through the use of reason, his or her credibility, and emotional appeal, guiding the persuadee towards the adoption of some belief, value, attitude or behavior often already subconsciously preferred by the persuader. It is a two way process.

Kathleen Reardon, in her book *Persuasion in Practice*, describes it this way: **“*Persuasion fulfills some need or desire of both of the parties; it is a two way process. The goal of persuasion can be said to be twofold: to further those of the persuader’s own ends, which are not at the expense of the persuadee’s interests, such as interfering with the persuadee’s freedom to choose; and to simply improve the persuadee’s own interests, irrespective of the ends of the persuader.*”²**

¹ Jowett, G & O'Donnell, V. *Propaganda and Persuasion*, SAGE, 7th Ed.

² Reardon, Kathleen. *Persuasion in Practice*, SAGE, 1991

What is Persuasive Communication?

The term comes from the Latin word “communicare,” which simply means in English “to make common.” This simple approach to the term is in keeping with Daniel Goleman’s remark that “the greater the degree of common understanding reached, the more effective the communication has been.”

Persuasive communication, on the other hand, depends on creating this common understanding with our audience first, and then going on to use some variation of our model to persuade them. However, our audience must always be *free* to decide. Kathleen Reardon says, ***“It (persuasion) does not create a state of dependency because it does not limit the freedom of either party. Persuasion is not something one does to another but something one does with another”***.³

What Can It Help You Achieve?

Let’s look at the following three situations, in which persuasion skills are critical.

Changing people’s attitudes, opinions and behavior: If people are unsatisfied with a situation, then guiding them to a new framework is straightforward enough. Here, we are satisfying their conscious or unconscious desire for something new. However, if they are comfortable with their beliefs and the way they are doing things, they will resist this appeal because they will feel there is no real need to change. Why should they change? This is a complex issue as persuasion seeks only voluntary change (without any misleading promises, force or manipulation).

Reinforcing beliefs, attitudes and behavior: When people already have a positive attitude towards our message, we just need to reinforce it. We, as

³ Reardon, P3

speakers, remind our audience of their freely decided attitude and of their desire to make it stronger. For example, a clergyman at a Sunday service usually speaks to the converted or near converted audience. People come to be reinforced and there is little controversy about the basics. These types of audiences need reassuring and motivating.

Establishing attitudes and opinions: The best example here is the teacher and pupils syndrome. The teacher tries to shape the response of the pupils in a positive way. Normally teachers have little trouble with credibility if their pupils respect their knowledge and position.

In any of these three “response” categories, we don’t limit our audience’s ability to choose. We don’t mentally force or threaten our audience in any way to accept our message, and finally, we don’t limit their options by deceit (even if it is in a good cause).

Audiences will only respond positively if some of their needs, desires or wants are satisfied to some degree. The need for us to create common ground with the persuadee cannot be emphasized enough. The more we hold in common with our audience, the easier the act of persuasion will be. Likewise, the more our perceptions of reality coincide, the easier it is for us to establish common ground. Our audience must see the benefit for themselves irrespective of whether those benefits are material or not. If, for example, an audience is obliged to listen to us, they will not necessarily freely participate in our proposals unless they see the benefits for themselves or for their organization. It may be our intention to try to change their behavior. This won’t happen unless there is agreement on at least a few points; we need to use some of their opinions to create this common ground.

Perhaps one of the most admirable aspects of Bill Clinton’s delivery, style and appeal is his ability to connect with his audience. He can empathize with them and the

audience can feel it. People like Reagan and Clinton know that their audiences are not faceless commodities. They also treat them as human beings with thinking minds who have, as we said earlier, their particular interests and commitments. Speakers such as Jack Kennedy, Bill Clinton, and Ronald Reagan attracted their audiences because of their abilities to create this common ground. Now let us turn for a moment to our model.

Three Elements of Persuasive Communication

The art of communicating persuasively centers round the following classical persuasive triad of the following elements: (1) communicating the right level of credibility (2) creating the right emotional environment and (3) inventing the right argumentation, or *logos*.

1. Credibility (Ethos)

Credibility is arguably the most critical element in persuasive communication. Audiences that have no previous knowledge of us are more likely to accept our message if they find us trustworthy. This isn't just communicating confidence. It is far more. It is communicating a credible character and a credible degree of expertise in the subject matter. The success of our communication efforts will, ultimately, depend on our personal and professional credibility. David Cunningham writes the following in his book, *Faithful Persuasion*: The authority of a particular argument "is closely connected to how the audience evaluates the person who offers that argument. As the audience judges the speaker's character to be more or less worthy of confidence, the speaker's arguments are accordingly considered more or less authoritative."

2. Emotional Environment (Pathos)

The second element concerns the effective employment of audience psychology. Pathos, as the Greeks called it, can be seen as the bringing of an audience to the right state of emotion in order to receive the message. It is about

connecting up emotionally with your audience. It is when our audience has reached this state that they will usually become open to our message. Because of this need to link-up emotionally, speakers often give priority to techniques enhancing eloquence over argumentation. This priority, unfortunately, is often taken too far and results in eloquence and other such persuasive techniques becoming the center of an address at the expense of clear arguments and even honesty. A misuse of the emotional appeal can result in open rejection of the message.

3. Argumentation/Rationality (Logos)

Logos, the third element, is based on our sensible use of rationality, data and facts. This, of course, includes our use of deductive and inductive logic or argumentation. In logos, we are inventing our arguments in order to gain the consent of our audience, in order to prove our case. A simple example could be that we make two statements that are quite acceptable to our audience because they are based on known facts. From these two statements, we can deduce a new statement, which, if fairly construed, will be accepted. Also, we can employ statistics and other factual type evidence to support our statement. Logos-dominated speeches are fundamentally presentations. They follow an orderly logical framework which is supported by argumentation and evidence within a certain emotional environment and supported by our personal and professional credibility.

Persuasion involves identifying what matters to people, what the common ground is, and to build our argumentation on that basis, putting it within this right emotional environment. However, this depends on our ability to empathize, and empathy does not always come easily. We first have to find out what matters to people, and where their interests lie. To achieve this, we must be imaginative.

Using Imagination in Communication

One way to describe our imagination is the power we have of making mental pictures of the world. Many people need to see and feel this picture before we can persuade them to change. But before we set out to build this picture, we must see and feel the picture ourselves. We must identify and be seen to identify with it. It is quite impossible for us to expect others to identify with our message if we ourselves cannot communicate our identification with the message. We must tell the story to ourselves first.

We simply cannot make mental pictures about abstract things. We need to associate them with tangible things in order to form a picture. Pure abstract things form part of our intellect, which we use to rationalize and look for a logical answer. We cannot form a picture of the concept of justice, integrity, honesty, goodness, sweetness, hardness, redness, for example, although we know what they are. The concept of justice can be explained through example, illustration or analogy. We can, for example, form a picture of a courtroom, a barrister or a judge in discussing the administration of justice. We can also relate justice to a particular case, and form a picture of this situation, but not of the concept itself. We must be careful how we combine the tangible and the conceptual.

It is for this reason that such rhetorical tools as metaphors, examples, analogies, and illustrations are very important in persuasive communications. They are important in speeches because normally our audiences need to visualize what we are saying to them. We may need to paint a picture of what is possible. Many times we are speaking about something that actually doesn't exist in a tangible form. We may be talking about the future and change.

Conclusion

Did you ever get that feeling of frustration after you dodged out of an opportunity to speak in public? Even when we do take the opportunity, how much time

do most of us spend afterwards being negative about ourselves? Those of us who are used to speaking in public still feel frustrated when we sense that we have not really been persuasive enough. On top of this, what a feeling of annoyance we get when we see colleagues on their feet apparently succeeding!

On an individual level, how many times have we been frustrated simply because we can't get a friend or a colleague to agree with us, or to cooperate with us in some way? Yes, we may communicate factual information well enough, but when it gets down to persuading others on either a one-to-one basis or in a group, we are not so effective. But all of this need not be so.

With a slight change of attitude towards ourselves, a little more knowledge of the persuasive framework, and a little practice, all of this can change. We may not become the most persuasive speakers in the world, but we will be a lot better than we are now, and feel a lot more satisfied with ourselves.

An essential prerequisite of this persuasive framework is that we must become audience-oriented, not only in our presentations and speeches but in our interpersonal relationships as well. Everything we do must be oriented towards our audience. After all, persuasion skills are pointless if we don't have an audience.

Even when our audience is really interested and ready for our message, we may have problems. We may have some problems of style and clarity, or some non-verbal issues that may hinder their reception of our message. For example, we may say things in an arrogant way. We may say things with a cynical tone. We may give an impression of not being trustworthy by our behavior.

Some decades ago, organizations were more hierarchical than today and consequently there was not the same need to be strongly persuasive with our audiences. But this was true for society in general. If the content of our message was free from misunderstandings, and the language was clear, and the structure was

rational, then matters were straightforward enough. Our audience had come for the information only and expected an educated performance. This was a perfectly acceptable method of communication then. So if we had a clear head, spoke grammatically correctly, and with the right accent, and used the right language, we needed little else to be a good communicator. The concentration was on the content and the onus was on the audience to receive the message (after all dependency was the hallmark of most societies). On top of this, people had fewer options and were prepared to be loyal and obedient. In a nutshell, people accepted authority because they depended on it. Today people have more options and are less dependent. Consequently, they are more uncertain as they have to rely on themselves. So if we have a message we feel worthy of communication, we need to be persuasive.

We, as leaders in some shape or form, need to persuade our audiences to accept our messages and usually to motivate them into action. As Aristotle in his 'Rhetoric' tells us, the orator ***“must be both a logician and a psychologist. Rhetoric can then be seen as precisely a mixture of these two disciplines.”***

Reference

“Developing Your Persuasive Edge”, by Brian O’C. Leggett, UNSA, 2006