

# ***Persuasion: an indispensable skill for business today***

*By*

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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 lives but of our domestic ones as well. This can range from ordinary domestic situations like trying to convince our 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, products, services, policies, and, in a strange way, our own talents and reputations. Persuasion, in fact, is an all-pervasive aspect of all of our lives.

So it is not surprising that recruiters in The Wall Street-Harris Interactive Survey, 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.

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 way to convince others to a point of view without resorting to coercion or manipulation.

***What is 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. It involves us, through the use of our credibility, creating the right emotional appeal, and our reason, guiding the persuadee towards a new position, whether this be some belief, attitude or behavior. It is a two way process, so is not something we do **to** another, it is something we do **with** the other person.

***What do we want to achieve by persuasive communication?***

Normally we want to change how people think, reinforce what they think, or establish attitudes and opinions. Let's look at the three situations.

**1. 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?

**2. Reinforcing beliefs, attitudes and behavior:** When people already have a positive attitude towards our message, we just need to reinforce it. We, as speakers, remind our audience of their freely decided attitude and of their desire to make it stronger.

**3. 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). This, therefore, is the difference between manipulation and persuasion.

### ***How can we achieve these responses?***

People 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..

### ***How do we communicate persuasively?***

Our model is centered round the classical persuasive triad of:

- 1. Communicating our credibility (Ethos)***
- 2. Creating the right emotional environment (Pathos)***
- 3. Inventing the right argumentation (Logos)***

The skill of persuasion is for us to identify what matters to people, what the common ground is, to build our credibility, to invent the right argumentation, and create the right emotional environment. However, this does depend on our ability to empathize, and empathy does not always come easily. In this way we can find out what matters to people, and where their interests lie. To achieve this, we must be imaginative.

### ***How important is imagination to communication?***

One way to describe our imagination is as 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 make mental pictures of the world, and then communicate them.. We must tell the story to ourselves first.

*It is for this reason that such rhetorical tools as metaphors, examples, analogies, illustrations, and story-telling are very important in persuasive communications. As we 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. We must be careful how we combine the tangible and the conceptual. So we need these rhetorical tools to help us to communicate our ideas.*

### **Conclusion**

On a personal basis, 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 very well 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. Aristotle in his 'Rhetoric' tells us, "***... the orator ... must be both a logician and a psychologist. Persuasion can then be seen as precisely a mixture of these two disciplines***".

### **Reference**

"Developing your persuasive edge", by Brian O`C. Leggett, UNSA 2006