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**Mastering the
Art of Persuasion**

by Betty A. Marton

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Mastering the Art of Persuasion

Are you a Donald Trump or a Mahatma Gandhi? Both have reputations as highly persuasive leaders, but with very different operating styles. Richard Boyatzis, professor of organizational behavior at Case Western Reserve University Weatherhead School of Management, defines two distinct drives for power: personalized power, or seeking influence for purely personal gain (the Trump kind); and socialized power, which is used to enhance the success of a group with shared objectives (the Gandhi variety).

If you are going to be a persuasive leader—and wield power effectively—you need to be clear about which model you choose to emulate. And there are consequences; the two models are not equally effective.

“Ask yourself why you are trying to exercise influence,” Boyatzis suggests. “Research shows that those whose drive is toward socialized power are the ones who make the most effective leaders, the ones who get promoted over the long term. The drive for personalized power often achieves short-term success, but then blows out.”

Once you know whether you’re more Gandhi or Trump, there are specific things you can do that will set you on the path of effective leadership and mastery of the art of persuasion.

Connect emotionally. Good persuaders use emotions in two crucial ways, writes Jay Conger in an article in *Harvard Business Review* (“The Necessary Art of Persuasion,” May–June 1998). They feel their commitment to the position they are advocating in their heart, mind, and gut and are able to show that to others. They also have a strong and accurate sense of their audi-

ence’s emotional state and adjust the tone and approach of their argument accordingly.

“In the business world, we like to think that our colleagues use reason to make their decisions,” he writes. “Yet if we scratch below the surface, we will always find emotions at play.”

Good persuaders have an accurate sense of their audience’s emotional state and adjust the tone and approach of their argument accordingly.

But before you can connect with others, you need to understand yourself. “Try first to know what your strengths and limits are,” advises Daniel Goleman, author of *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. “Get feedback from people you work with who know you well. You’ll find a difference between what you think you’re good at and what others think you’re good at.”

Developing self-awareness takes time. In order to find out how you really feel about things that are going on in your business day, take regular time-outs from everyday stress. You can view these times as a gift you give yourself each day—in the shower, driving to work, during a lunch-hour walk. Whenever you find the time, nothing can replace the insights gained during periods of quiet reflection.

Find the common ground. Frame your position so it appeals strongly to the people you want to persuade. You can do this by knowing what they are thinking and what their concerns are. This requires not being so intent on getting your own message out that you fail to listen to what is being said.

“Watch Kenneth Branagh in *Henry V*,” suggests Murray M. Dalziel, global managing director of Organizational Effectiveness and Management Development Services for the Hay Group (Philadelphia). “Henry dresses up as a foot soldier, wanders around to campfires, and constructs his speech out of what he learns there.”

The best communicators, according to Goleman, have the ability to put aside their internal preoccupations and listen clearly to the concerns of others. “Developing empathy so that you can accurately perceive how others feel is a huge advantage when it comes to per-

suading them to your way of seeing things,” he said.

Develop your communication skills. Use vivid language and compelling evidence to reinforce your position. According to Conger, research shows that listeners absorb information in proportion to its vividness. Learn to give better presentations by taking acting lessons and presentation workshops.

“Think of every conversation as a dramatic presentation,” says Boyatzis. “You don’t excite people by giving them factual answers.”

Have a wide range of strategies and tools that you can use to get your point across, such as stories, anecdotes, and authoritative sources. Be sensitive to when one approach isn’t working, so you can switch to another.

Establish your credibility. “Research shows,” writes Conger, “that most managers are in the habit of overestimating their own credibility—often considerably.” The cornerstones of credibility are expertise and relationships built on

trust, according to Harry Mills, author of *Artful Persuasion: How to Command Attention, Change Minds, and Influence People*. When leaders lack them, Mills says, “we discount everything they say.” How do you establish trust? By making commitments and fulfilling them. For Mills, trust begins with the “law of candor.” He advises telling the truth—suitably packaged, of course, but the truth nonetheless.

Establish trusting relationships by networking both within and beyond

your organization. Join community groups and professional organizations to build your networking skills. People need to feel you care about them and their growth. Become a mentor—get involved in coaching and counseling others.

Become an effective team builder. Practice running small groups with meaningful content. Take workshops in group processing and get feedback in all settings. “Every time you’re in a group setting, part of your job is

to make sure people are inspired, involved, committed to something important,” Boyatzis emphasizes. It’s also useful to know how to build a coalition of support so you know who to go to when you need to make a pitch.

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Learn to negotiate and manage conflict. According to Boyatzis, a course in alternative dispute resolution can develop the skills to help people in the middle of conflict. “This is a very sophisticated skill, especially if your emotions are aroused and you need to calm everybody down,” he says.

What Not To Do

According to Dalziel, it is difficult for most managers to remember that they are no longer the “hands-on” people they may have once been.

“As a leader, you can no longer directly affect outcomes,” he explains. “You can only affect the people who affect the outcomes by inspiring, energizing, and making others feel strong and capable.”

Jay Conger has also defined four common mistakes to avoid when trying to persuade others to your point of view.

1 Avoid the hard sell. A strong position at the start gives potential opponents something to fight against. Rather, present your position with finesse and reserve.

2 Compromise. Persuasion is a process of give-and-take. People need

Persuasive Conversations

“All leaders talk,” says Philip J. Harkins, president of Linkage, Inc., a Lexington, Mass.-based organizational development company, and author of *Powerful Conversations: How High Impact Leaders Communicate*. Harkins describes leadership itself as a series of conversations—with colleagues, employees, stockholders, the media—anyone who could influence the success or failure of a business.

Harkins argues that leaders should make sure that every conversation they have results in three outcomes: advancement of an agenda, shared learning, and a stronger relationship.

Advancement of an agenda. Harkins says that leaders who begin with an honest expression of their concerns will be able to avoid conversations that don’t go anywhere and waste everyone’s time. The key is to express your need in both emotional and intellectual terms as a need you have, not as a problem that the other party has. Don’t throw blame around, in other words, because that just makes people defensive. Rather, tell them where you’re coming from. It’s the difference between “I need to be able to figure out how we can meet our quotas next quarter,” and “you screwed up—you missed the quotas.”

Shared learning. A conversation that has begun honestly has the chance to involve a real exchange of insights. That takes work on both sides—both sides have to be willing to open their minds and learn a little. If quotas were missed, then the employee needs to understand the importance of making them the next time, but you need to understand the reasons behind the unfulfilled quotas. Maybe the employee isn’t getting the support she needs to accomplish her goals.

Stronger relationships. A conversation that has begun honestly and has involved shared learning will foster stronger relationships among the parties involved. This stronger relationship in turn can make it easier to have a powerful conversation the next time. Harkins’ insight is that honesty is the basis of these favorable outcomes. And honesty begets trust—the basic condition for successful leadership of any kind.

to know that a persuader is open to their concerns. In addition, compromise can often lead to more sustainable shared solutions.

3 Don't confuse argument with persuasion. Arguing your position is only one part of effective persuasion. You still need to rely on such other tactics as connecting emotionally and communicating effectively.

4 Persuasion is not a one-shot effort. Persuasion is a process that involves listening, testing a position, compromising, and more. It is not an event. It

can be slow and difficult, but it's worth the effort. □

— by **betty a. marton**

Further Reading:

Artful Persuasion: How to Command Attention, Change Minds, and Influence People by Harry Mills (2000, AMACOM, 240 pp., \$17.95, Tel. 800-714-6395)

Powerful Conversations: How High Impact Leaders Communicate by Philip J. Harkins (1999, McGraw Hill, 192 pp., \$24.95, Tel. 800-352-3566)

Working with Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman (1998, Bantam, 383 pp., \$25.95, available through local and online bookstores)

The Seven Triggers of Persuasion

How do you make conversations persuasive? Harry Mills, chief executive of The Mills Group, a New Zealand training company, and author of *Artful Persuasion: How to Command Attention, Change Minds, and Influence People*, identifies seven “triggers” of persuasion for leaders to use. “Humans are mental misers,” says Mills. “When we are rushed or pressured, we like to conserve our energies by using simple rules of thumb to make decisions.” By understanding the seven triggers, leaders can align their efforts at persuasion with the way the mind works.

Contrast. Because all judgment is relative, Mills says, use contrast to make your argument appealing. Establish a benchmark, one that lets your proposal show up in a favorable light. If you're trying to persuade your executive team that a round of layoffs is a reasonable step, for example, mention other companies that had to lay off many thousands more workers.

Reciprocation. Most people feel that if they have been given something, they should give something in return. Thus, wise leaders are first givers, then takers. Always be ready with the first concession in a negotiation. Cooperate in little things, so that you can win the big reciprocation.

Commitment and Consistency. Get small initial commitments. You will bind your team in a web of commitment

that will ultimately extend to the larger issues. People like to believe that they are behaving consistently, so establishing a consistent pattern of commitment is essential. Smart facilitators know this and get negotiating parties to agree on the ground rules first, both to have the rules and to establish the pattern of agreement.

Authority. Leaders are naturally given the authority that comes with the position. It is yours to keep or to lose. Dress and act the part.

Scarcity. We naturally want things that we perceive to be scarce. Cultivate this sense of scarcity in your employees by creating a vision of the company as unique, something rare, and difficult to achieve.

Conformity. While most of us prefer to think otherwise, the urge to conform or to be part of a successful team is strong in most people. Enlist your employees to your cause, not by asking them to join you, but by asking them to join the team of successful people that you are leading.

Liking. We naturally want to associate with people that we like. Stress the similarities you have with your team, and look for ways to build bridges to them through social occasions that play up those similarities.