



Working Resources

Helping Companies Assess, Select, Coach and Retain Emotionally Intelligent People

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Newsletter

Leadership by Persuasion

As a leader, your success depends upon your ability to get things done: up, down and across all lines. Today's organizations are politically complex and fluid, which blurs lines of formal authority.

Colleagues continually question and challenge authority. The flattening of organizations has created informal power networks that render the old command-and-control style of leadership obsolete.

To survive and succeed, you must learn to persuade people: to convince them to take action on your behalf and under your direction, often without formal authority. Even when you do have formal authority, you may be hesitant to use it.

Work is generally completed by cross-functional teams of peers, with a mix of baby boomers and Gen-Xers who show little tolerance for authority.

Electronic communication and globalization have further eroded the traditional hierarchy. People who perform work don't just ask "what should I do?" but "why should I do it?"

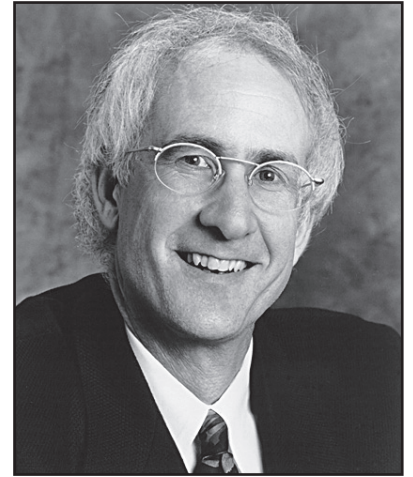
Leaders must answer the "why" question effectively. Persuasion is widely perceived as a skill reserved for sales and negotiation. Now, it's an essential proficiency for all leaders.

Defining Our Terms

"Effective persuasion becomes a negotiating and learning process through which a persuader leads colleagues to a problem's shared solution." – Jay A. Conger, PhD
Author, *Winning 'Em Over: A New Model for Management in the Age of Persuasion*

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.

Dr. Maynard Brusman is a consulting psychologist and trusted advisor to the senior leadership team. He is the president of Working Resources, a talent management consulting, training and executive coaching firm. We help companies assess, select, coach and retain top talent. We specialize in executive selection, competency modeling, succession planning, leadership consulting, 360-degree feedback, change management, emotional intelligence, culture surveys, career development and leadership coaching.



Dr. Brusman is a highly sought-after speaker and workshop leader. He facilitates mission, values, and vision retreats.

"Maynard Brusman is one of the foremost coaches in the United States. He utilizes a wide variety of assessments in his work with senior executives and upper level managers, and is adept at helping his clients both develop higher levels of emotional intelligence and achieve breakthrough business results. As a senior leader in the executive coaching field, Dr. Brusman brings an exceptional level of wisdom, energy, and creativity to his work." – Jeffrey E. Auerbach, Ph.D., President, College of Executive Coaching

He has been chosen as an expert to appear on radio and TV, and in the Wall Street Journal and Fast Company.

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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 key elements:

1. Credibility
2. Understanding your audience
3. A solid argument
4. Competent communication

Effective persuasion may prove difficult and time-consuming, but it is ultimately the most powerful style of managing people.

As Larry Bossidy, former chairman of the board of Honeywell International Inc., once explained: *“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.”*

Dr. Conger describes the old traditional view of persuasion: *“First, you strongly state your position. Second, you outline the supporting arguments, followed by a highly assertive, data-based exposition. Finally, you enter the deal-making stage and work toward a close.”*

Discovery, Preparation, Dialogue

Any attempt to persuade may provoke colleagues to oppose and polarize. If, according to Dr. Conger, persuasion is a learning and negotiating process, then it must include three phases: *discovery, preparation and dialogue.*

Before you even begin to speak, you must consider your position from every angle. Getting ready to present your ideas may take weeks or months of planning, as you learn about your audience and prepare your arguments.

Dialogue occurs both before and during the persuasion process. You must invite people to discuss solutions, debate the merits of your position, offer honest feedback and suggest alternatives.

To effectively persuade, you must test and revise ideas to reflect your colleagues’ concerns and needs. Top leaders listen to others, integrating their perspectives into a shared solution.

Success depends on being open-minded and willing to incorporate compromises. When colleagues see that you’re eager to hear their views and make changes that encompass their needs and concerns, they respond positively.

Simply put, they trust you more. This is such a powerful dynamic that the best persuaders often enter the process with judicious compromises in mind.

Four Steps to Successful Persuasion

Leading through persuasion requires you to follow 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.

To avoid failure, your strategy for persuasion must be as compelling as your arguments.

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.

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.

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:

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

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.

In one study, the best persuaders canvassed key individuals who had a good pulse on the overall audience's mood and emotional expectations. They actively gathered information via informal conversations held in hallways or lunch areas.

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.

Virtual Teams

It's even harder to persuade when your relationships and connections are electronically based. Without face-to-face meetings, you cannot gather critical nonverbal cues that help you connect with others and build trust.

If you usually communicate by email, arrange frequent phone conferences to interact on a more personal level. Virtual team members must pay particular attention to achieving congruence. Although actual meetings require travel expenses, they may be well worth the cost.

You can use persuasion to pull people together, move ideas forward, galvanize change and forge constructive solutions. Mastering this skill requires dedication and practice as part of an ongoing mission to negotiate smoothly in lieu of "selling" your ideas.

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.

Resource:

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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