

How to be persuasive while debriefing

Management does not automatically act on your recommendation

When Henry Kissinger was National Security Adviser to the US President, he once received high-grade intelligence from a new analyst. Kissinger, however, did not act upon it. When afterwards the intelligence proved to have been correct and an opportunity had been missed, Kissinger reputedly said to the analyst¹:

“Well, you warned me but you did not convince me”

Does this sound familiar? It certainly does to me. After tedious work you discover and communicate a competitive threat to a company. But nothing happens. As per your forecast the threat unfolds. You warned but did not convince. What enables me to cope with this happening is to remember the following equation:

$$\text{Analysis impact} = \text{quality} * \text{acceptance}$$

Top-quality does not matter when you fail to get the analysis accepted by those that need to act upon it. There is much to say about how to get acceptance. Sometimes, however, a picture says more than a thousand words. So, let's now go to the movies.

Twelve angry men

In the 1956 movie *Twelve Angry Men*, 12 white American men together make up a jury. They have to reach a verdict on whether an accused Afro-American young man is guilty or not guilty of having killed his father. The verdict has to be unanimous. Eleven of the twelve men agree: the evidence was compelling. One character, however, has his doubts. There is no instant unanimity, so the jury has to start deliberating. In a magnificent way the doubter gradually convinces all other jury members that the evidence is less than compelling. For this he uses a wide array of persuasion techniques, using tailor-made logic and appeals for each fellow jury member. The movie is still relevant today as it illustrates attributes of persuasion that may today still help also outside the jury's room.

Subtlety is the hallmark attribute of persuasion

Persuasion is suave. It is hard to describe but when you see it, you recognize it². In persuasion, non-verbal yet visible cues are at least as important as verbal cues and often are more subtle and insidious. It is much harder to insulate oneself against them; persuasion works in ways we may often not even consciously recognize.

Hence, I note the relevance of visualization in presenting analysis. The human brain during evolution has been wired to see things that move. Things that move to our ancestors may have included predators that posed such a threat to survival that seeing them move required an immediate response. Capitalizing on the human propensity to act upon things that move, delivering analysis in moving pictures may work for you. When I once wanted a management team to believe its customers looked for change, the team and I did not deliver a 30 slides presentation to prove the point. Rather, we prepared three 60 second customer interview films, with the customers expressing their needs on video. The impact was remarkable.

Empathy and sincerity are critical to persuasion

Persuasion has been defined as the art of influencing people³. The key equation of persuasion is³:

$$\text{Persuasion} = \text{Empathy} + \text{Sincerity}$$

Great persuaders create the perception of empathy with the people they aim to influence. Counterintuitively, persuasion starts with listening and paraphrasing skills. Listening is the entry point to empathy³. When you have completed your picture of the individual that you aim to persuade, it is easier to decide which strings to pull to start influencing the other towards accepting your point. This may sound manipulative, but what if the goal justifies the persuasion means?

A good cause may for example be to convince your friend to stop smoking. Persuading someone to stop smoking begins by showing empathy for the other person's need to smoke - whatever that need may be. The latter may only be possible by asking the right questions. Once the other is convinced of the sincerity of the intentions to help, the person may open up to consider what other options may be available to more healthily meet the current personal need he now fulfils through smoking.

Persuasion is about more than language, but language still matters

Properly using language is another tool in persuasion. When communicating for impact in politics the following rules have been reported to apply⁴. Your language should:

- consist of short sentences (think: America first, Donald J. Trump)
- consist of short words within these short sentences (think: I have a dream, Martin Luther King or Yes, we can, Barack H. Obama)
- open up an aspirational future to the audience (think: Imagine, John Lennon)
- offer novelty
- be consistent in imagery in verbal and visual imagery, sound and texture (this applies especially when multiple messages are conveyed)

Driving acceptance for analysis through persuasiveness

When looking for more acceptance for your work, consider questions like:

- how aspirational to management is the language you use?
- how can your analysis contribute to your company's brighter future?

Above we already saw that empathy and aspiration is not enough. To be successful in persuasion one also needs to be credibly sincere. This is why your objectivity and neutrality are so relevant. When you are perceived to be a player in a politicized dossier you will never be perceived to be sincere. Hence, politicization is always a risk when aiming for persuasiveness. In my corporate experience as analyst, once you move yourself intentionally into a politicized position you are neither on the way up, nor on the way down, but usually on the way out.

Notes

- .1. George, R. Z. [2008], The art of strategy and intelligence, In: R.Z. George, J.B. Bruce (Editors), Analyzing Intelligence – origins, obstacles, and innovations, Georgetown University Press, Washington DC, p. 113.
- .2. Gladwell, M. [2000], The tipping point, Back Bay books, Little, Brown and Company, New York, pp. 74-79.
- .3. Borg, J. [2013], Persuasion – the art of influencing people, Pearson Education Ltd, Harlow, UK, pp. 5-11.
- .4. Freedman, Sir L. [2013], Strategy – a history, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, p. 435.