

The Power of Persuasion

By Alfonso Bucero

Most project practitioners know that effective persuasion is necessary for project success but it is a difficult and time consuming proposition, but it may also be more powerful than the command-and-control managerial model it succeeds.

I understand persuasion as the language of business leadership. In my particular experience, as a project manager, I use logic, persistence and passion to get others to buy a good idea and many times I failed.

What, then, constitutes effective persuasion? I understand persuasion as a learning and negotiating process, then it involves phases of discovery, preparation and dialogue. Getting ready to persuade team members and other project stakeholders can take weeks or months of planning, as you learn about your audience and the position you intend to argue. I have observed effective persuaders consider their positions from every angle.

Some of the questions we need to answer to be an effective persuader are:

- What investments in time and money will my position require from others?
- Is my supporting evidence weak in any way?
- Are there alternative positions I need to examine?

Dialogue happens before and during the persuasion process. Before the process begins, effective persuaders use dialogue to learn more about their audience's opinions, concerns, and perspectives. During the process, dialogue continues to be a form of learning, but it is also the beginning of the negotiation stage. You invite people to discuss, even debate, the merits of your position, and then to offer honest feedback and suggest alternative solutions.

That may sound like a slow way to achieve your goal, but effective persuasion is about testing and revising ideas in concert with your colleagues' concerns and needs. In fact, the best persuaders not only listen to others but also incorporate their perspectives into a shared solution.

Persuasion often involves - indeed, demands - compromise. Perhaps that is why the most effective persuaders are open-minded, never dogmatic. They enter the persuasion process prepared to adjust their viewpoints and incorporate other's ideas. When team members, colleague sand other project stakeholders see that a persuader is eager to hear their views and willing to make changes in response to their needs and concerns,

they respond very positively. They trust the persuader more and listen more attentively. They don't fear being bowled over or manipulated. They see the persuader as flexible and are thus more willing to make sacrifices themselves.

Effective persuasion involves four distinct and essential steps:

1. Establish Credibility:

Practice authenticity and integrity. I mean say what you believe and act on what you say (Randall L. Englund - Creating an environment for successful projects book). Achieve the commitments you agreed with your customers. Some examples are: *promising to send a project status report on a determined date and doing it, promising to deliver a project deliverable on a date and doing it.*

2. Frame their goals in a way that identifies common ground with those they intend to persuade:

Even if your credibility is high, your position must still appeal strongly to the people you are trying to persuade. Effective persuaders must be adept at describing their positions in terms that illuminate their advantages. The way is identifying shared benefits.

3. Reinforce their positions using vivid language and compelling evidence:

With credibility established and a common frame identified, persuasion becomes a matter of presenting evidence. Effective persuaders supplement numerical data with examples, stories, metaphors, and analogies to make their positions come alive. That use of language paints a vivid word picture and, doing so, lends a compelling and tangible quality to the persuader's point of view.

4. Connect emotionally with their project stakeholders:

Good persuaders are aware of the primacy of emotions and are responsive to them in two important ways. First they show their own emotional commitment to the position they are advocating. However if you act too emotional, people may doubt your clear head.

As a project manager, one of the powerful lessons I learned about persuasion over the years is that there's just as much strategy in how you present your position as in the position itself. I would say the strategy of presentation is more critical. Persuasion for me is not convincing and selling but learning and negotiating. Furthermore, it needs to be seen as an art form that requires commitment and practice.

TODAY IS A GOOD DAY to start developing your persuasion skills.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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