

The art of persuasion in an age of uncertainty

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The ability to sell our ideas and points of view is crucial. But persuasion is often overlooked in current management literature.

The art of persuasion in management has been described as far back as 1938, when Chester I. Barnard argued that it was one of the fundamental non-economic processes. Although Barnard considered persuasion to be a key element for an effective organization, it is often overlooked in current management literature, despite the fact that communication and interpersonal skills are more important than ever.

[IESE's Brian O'Connor Leggett](#), professor in the department of Managing People in Organizations, has long been interested in the use of communication tools such as rhetoric and persuasion in the management process. In the paper "[Rhetoric and Persuasion in Management](#)," Leggett, together with Josep M. Rosanas, professor of Accounting and Control, analyzes the continued importance of persuasion in what he describes as an uncertain environment.

According to the authors, the days of dependency, when information was delivered top-down, is long gone. Instead, our flatter, interdependent society creates a world of uncertainty within which persuasion is needed in order to sell our ideas, points of view and even our talents and reputation.

"It is only because of uncertainty that we must turn to persuasion to motivate people to help us get our jobs done."

People each have individual goals and perceptions in organizations, and these goals are often

at cross-purposes with those of others within the same organization. Persuasion is a means of making others see things our way - or at least securing their cooperation to accomplish corporate goals.

According to the paper, persuasion is like a contract in common law, where both sides need to gain something, although not necessarily in equal proportions.

The authors stress that persuasive communication is based on creating a common understanding with your audience, and they encourage the reader to keep in mind the fine line between persuasion and manipulation.

Three-dimensional framework

Leggett and Rosanas outline the reasons persuasion skills are critical for an organization. They can:

- change people's attitudes, opinions and behaviors, guiding them toward a new framework;
- reinforce beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, reminding people of their freely adopted attitudes and strengthening them;
- establish attitudes and opinions, shaping a person's response in a positive way.

To put persuasion into practice, the authors delve into Aristotle's three-dimensional framework as the basis to effective communication.

Ethos (credibility): The most critical element in persuasive communication, the success of a speaker's efforts to sway his or her audience will depend, ultimately, on credibility. An audience will always be more willing to accept a message from a speaker who appears credible. It is not just a matter of trust and knowledge, but also of non-verbal communication.

Pathos (the right emotional environment): Creating the right atmosphere is important when generating the desired audience response. The speaker must see what he or she has in common with the audience and highlight the points on which both agree.

Logos (argument): This refers to the arguments a speaker brings to bear, the sequence of deductive or inductive reasoning through which an idea is formed. Persuasion involves identifying what matters to people, finding common ground and building one's argument in the right emotional environment.

After building on this framework, the paper characterizes different modes of speaking and puts these several rhetorical dimensions into context. For example, pathos-driven speech is often used for a crisis or special occasion (for example, George Bush's and Tony Blair's speeches in building the case for war). Logos-based speech is often used when presenting business or factual data (for organizational changes planned to take place over long periods of time). And ethos-based speech is often used by visionaries (think of Jack Welch of General Electric in his post-"Neutron Jack" days).

"By supporting our statements with the right arguments, creating the right emotional environment and cultivating credibility, we will greatly improve our ability to communicate persuasively the reasonableness of our message in today's uncertain environment," the authors state.

To achieve this, the paper calls upon the reader to return to the humanistic tradition described by the British philosopher Stephen Toulmin. This tradition urges putting the human being before theoretical models, embarking on self-exploration and searching for a communion with the society we live in, in the hopes of succeeding in having both rationality and reasonableness as a guide.

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