

Great Leaders Are Great Salespeople

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Abstract

This article emphasizes the fact that leaders use persuasion for influence, much like that of sales people who seek to influence decisions, attitudes, and beliefs. Understanding that persuasion is a core ingredient of successful leadership influence, this article delves into why leaders should learn and use persuasion to convince others of the merits and ethics of a direction of thinking. As much as been written about persuasion and influence, the parallel to selling has been underwritten, possibly due to the nature of how many may envision sales people as self-serving, one-sided agents of influence. Selling is not a dirty word and this article underscores the need for leaders to be persuasive as well as logical, and ethical.

There is only one way...to get anybody to do anything. And that is by making the other person want to do it.

- Dale Carnegie

Bass (1981) states that "persuasion is seen as one form of leadership" (p 1), and it must be agreed that it is a powerful tool for forming both the expectations and beliefs in others. Leadership, often described in terms of influencing people or groups toward goal setting and goal achievement, seems dependent on the leader's ability to persuade in one form or the other. Boe (2011) remarks that throughout history, our most admired leaders are remembered primarily for their ability to instill courage and inspire confidence, and to just think how different this world might be without the calming reassurance of FDR's fireside chats or Churchill's defiant eloquence. Boe continues that President Kennedy once remarked that Winston Churchill had the ability to take the English language to war, reflecting that

Churchill clearly understood the power of words - he would spend hours at a time rewriting and rehearsing his speeches and as a result, galvanizing a nation with his words.

As Northouse (2013) points out, leaders have many demands: they inspire, they mediate, they motivate, and they direct change. However, leaders have another key role; that role is influencing other people. Influence is the ability to persuade someone to think or act in the way you want. This ability is an essential part of leadership. It can be said that if someone can't convince people of ideas and concepts probably isn't a leader. Therefore, it's important for an effective leader to understand persuasion as a core construct of influence. That way, the leader can use this knowledge to become even more skilled at influencing others to get things done.

In business, leaders are normally responsible for the articulation of the vision, mission, and goals that inspire others, and build solidarity, striking a common bond with the people they lead Kouzes and Posner (2012). A leader must have valid facts, conviction of purpose, and a compelling rationale for his or her advocacy of a specific plan of action. Beyond that, the leader must influence the perception of those facts. It doesn't matter whether you're an executive motivating employees to achieve a mission, or a manager setting goals with a sales team, if you want to focus attention and gain consensus, you must be able to help people conceptualize your vision by painting word pictures and vividly describing an achievable yet challenging future state of the organization.

Most leadership theorists seldom agree completely on how best to define leadership, but most would agree that leaders are individuals who guide, direct, mentor, serve, motivate, or inspire others. They are the men and women who influence others in an organization, or within a community. They persuade others to follow them, believe what they believe, or pursue the beneficial goals they define. As Lussier and Achua (2001) point out, leaders present logical arguments using factual evidence to persuade followers to meet objectives.

By persuading, the leader shapes expectations and beliefs. In many instances, the leader's ability to connect with people emotionally and convince them of the value and appropriateness of the idea is what guarantees goal success. Northouse (2013) believes that in business, an individual's success as a leader is defined by the ability to persuade with clarity, conviction, purpose, and passion, and believes that persuasion is used by leaders as a means to create change through nonjudgmental argument.

It can be said that leadership is synonymous with effective communication and the use of good 'storytelling' through vivid metaphors and conceptualization that transport the listener to a different dimension. Brock and Green (2005) state that stories enliven and grab hold of the mind, and stimulate the imagination. Psychologists tell us the brain thinks in pictures, not words. Accordingly analogies, metaphors, stories, and anecdotes all work together to help create vivid word pictures to keep listeners interested and emotionally involved.

De Pree (2004) states that business is moving from a practice of management through hierarchical power to a process of leadership through persuasion. The role of leadership is to have ideas, to persuade others to your ideas and to inspire others to give their best. However, the concept of persuasion, like that of power, often confuses people. It is often seen as so 'messy', so complex – and so destructive when mishandled – that many would rather just avoid it altogether so as not to come across to others as being deceptively manipulative. But in the organization and community, persuasion can be a force for enormous good - it can create bonds, advance ideas, serve as a change catalyst, and advance constructive solutions. It can be said then that the art of persuasion is the art of finding the best available means of communication moving a select audience in a specific situation to a specific decision and outcome.

Persuasion Further Defined

So what exactly is persuasion? According to Perloff (2003), persuasion can be defined as "...a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behaviors regarding an issue through the transmission of a message in an atmosphere of free choice." Persuasion is all about achieving a specific outcome. It's aimed at getting an audience to take certain action. But to succeed, a leader must first either change their attitudes and beliefs or reinforce attitudes and beliefs they already hold.

Bass (1997) believes leadership and selling are both forms of influence and the behaviors and attitudes of leaders parallels the behaviors and attitudes of sales people. Selling is responding to consumer needs and wants through planned, personalized communication in order to influence purchase decisions and ensure satisfaction. Selling is convincing someone of the value of a proposal inducing them to make a purchase. Selling is aligning wants and needs with answers, solutions, and benefits. Thus, a seller uses persuasion to influence a purchase decision.

From this knowledge, consider this logic:

- Major Premise: Leadership is influence.
- Minor Premise: Salespeople influence others.
- Conclusion: Leaders are salespeople.

As Plato observed, persuasion is the key to power and influence. Admittedly, the topic of persuasion often brings to mind the tactics of unscrupulous advertisers and sales people to induce consumption, and the peddlers of entertainment, drugs and sex. However, persuasion is good and right, as long as it is ethical and non-manipulative in a deceitful way. Contrary to the belief of many, persuasion is not a bad thing. Persuasion is not the same as manipulation. The difference is the intent behind the action. While persuasion can be used as a tool to manipulate and change the beliefs of the listener, ill intent and self-serving motives are the hallmark of deceptive manipulation.

Persuasion Applied

Influence is a powerful resource in leadership; it provides opportunity to change attitudes, understand norms, values, demonstrate commitment, building relationships, working toward common purposes. As John Maxwell said, "All leadership is influence" (1998). Accordingly, we must stop thinking of persuasion as a one-sided sales pitch and recognized that persuasion is a learning and negotiating process - a dialogue that involves careful preparation, the proper framing of arguments, the presentation of vivid supporting evidence, and the effort to find the correct emotional match with your audience.

Persuasion then is an essential proficiency for all leaders, requiring you to move people toward a position they don't currently hold. You must not only make a rational argument, but also frame your ideas, approaches and solutions in ways that appeal to diverse groups of people with basic human emotions and different needs and expectations. Daft (2011) expands on this thinking by stating that people don't want to know only the 'what' they should be doing, but also the 'why' they are doing it.

To be a leader you must be an expert at persuading and influencing others to work in a common direction. This is why all excellent leaders are also excellent, persuasive salespeople. They do not order people to do things; instead, they persuade them to accept certain responsibilities, with specific deadlines and agreed-upon standards of performance.

Pratkanis and Aronson (1992) state that persuasion shows up in almost every walk of life. Nearly every major politician hires media consultants and political pundits to offer advice on how to persuade the public, and to get and stay elected. They argue the workplace, too, has become fertile ground for office politics and persuasion requiring managers to spend up to 80% of their time persuading fellow employees.

Persuasion is a discipline of the mind. It asks leaders to reason, analyze, and examine ideas, information, situations, and possibilities. It asks them to integrate sometimes seemingly disparate information into an integrated whole that is internally consistent and reflective of the core vision and values guiding the work community. Leaders are successful when they can induce members to endorse, accept, and then incorporate the leader's vision and values into their own personalities. This task requires that leaders know their followers, know the work processes and the end results sought, and merge all into an intellectually coherent unity.

Persuasive leaders are those who use conviction and reason to guide others to adopt an idea, attitude, or action. They make their pleas personal and tangible, ensuring there is a high degree of authenticity when communicating their wants and needs to others. They understand that a problem well defined and grounded in experience will gain higher acceptance and greater cooperation from others. Therefore, they relate their experience and understanding of the problem before explaining or exploring the solution. Northouse (2013) states that when using a 'situational leadership style', the leader 'sells' another way of working, explaining and clarifying decisions, thus spending time listening and advising and persuading as opposed to telling or demanding.

As Cialdini (1993) notes, some individuals seem and act more persuasive than others. What can be especially frustrating, as we watch individuals almost effortlessly charm their way to getting what they want, is the realization that they are no more talented or any more experienced than us. The only apparent difference is that they seem to have mastered the art of persuading others to give them what they want.

Managers hire persuasive people. Job applicants with similar backgrounds, skills and experience, often find it's the most persuasive candidate that is the one hired. As a result, in today's competitive workplace our ability to influence and persuade others has never been so important.

At the heart of leadership lies the ability to influence others and in corporate life, your power of persuasion is not measured by the quality of your big idea, but by the sustainable performance your people achieve because of it. That's why persuasion matters and why influential leaders learn and apply it.

Persuasion Can Be Learned

Persuasion isn't easy. We know that because we're not easily persuaded ourselves. But if you want people to back you, support your plan, cut costs, try harder and go the extra mile, you'll have to know how to persuade them.

The good news is persuasion can be learned and communication skills researchers have discovered means and methods for improving your powers of persuasion and influencing people to your point of view. In the workplace, employing them can improve your chances of finding that great new job, getting the promotion you deserve, closing sales presentations, becoming a more effective networker, and generally increasing your influence at work.

Our greatest leaders, including Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, moved people by instilling a shared desire for change. These great orators won people over. They knew about rhetoric – the art of persuasive speaking – and they used it to great effect. It comes from Ancient Greece and it gives us 3 rules for persuasive speaking:

- Logos: Explain your idea logically so that people can see the sense in it.
- Ethos: Express yourself authentically so that people believe in you.
- Pathos: Connect with your audience personally so they feel moved to support your idea.

Ramage and Bean (1998) stated that Aristotle particularly taught that a speaker's ability to persuade an audience is based on how well the speaker appeals to that audience in these three different areas: logos, ethos, and pathos. Considered together, these appeals form what later rhetoricians have called the rhetorical triangle, where Logos appeals to reason. Logos can also be thought of as the text of the argument, as well as how well a speaker (leader) has argued his/her point; Ethos appeals to the leader's character - Ethos can also be thought of as the role of the leader in the argument, and how credible his/her argument is; and Pathos appeals to the emotions and the sympathetic imagination, as well as to beliefs and values.- Pathos can also be thought of as the role of the audience in the argument.

For example: If a leader is seeking to cast a vision that will inspire and motivate followers, he or she should have established or is establishing credibility as an authentic, honest, and respectable person of good character (ethos), who is emotionally-connecting with the audience and reaching them on a personal level (pathos), using a logical, believable, factual argument that is based on clear, supportive evidence that makes sense (logos).

According to Brooks (2004), before a leader can attempt to persuade (sell) someone about an idea or solution, they also need to know how it meets their needs and wants (wants are often stronger than needs) and why they should have reason to be interested in what you are proposing (payoffs). It helps for leaders to present ideas assertively without appearing as overbearing and self-serving. Persuasive leaders convince with respect; listen to the thoughts of others very carefully and sincerely; and persevere with the value of their ideas.

From a systemic standpoint, Conrad (2011) points out there are three critical aspects that must be addressed when trying to persuade someone: the listener must believe the concept makes clear sense to them; they must see 'personal value' in the proposal; and they must be a part of the proposal – involved and participating in even a small way. Accordingly, sense-making, clearly articulating the value of a proposal, and getting people engaged through involvement in the solution will compel people to not just accept the proposal, but also be active proponents of it.

Persuasive leaders also know there will be doubts and there will be objections. They uncover them and address them early and proactively, but don't overly dwell on negatives, because their goal is to be positive, persuasive, and solution-minded.

Finally, persuasive leaders ask for commitment - make it as easy as possible for the others to make one. And, they make it clear their ideas, ambitions, and proposals are not self-serving initiatives – they are things that will help make the organization and the individuals successful in challenging and volatile business environments.

However, persuasion can be used to spur someone to action or to make a decision without actually earning their sincere buy-in. With influence, dedicating time to win someone's heart or responding to

someone's inner-most needs and desires are a prerequisite to the process of inspiring them to take action or make a particular decision.

Selling a Vision

One may think good salespeople are selling a product or service, but the truth is they are selling a vision of what that product or service will do or how it will make people feel as a result ownership. As leaders help people to see a vision of something different in the future, they are doing the same thing.

Morgan (2010) asserts that the communicating a leader does is all, essentially, persuasion. That's what leaders do. They persuade people to work together, to achieve more than they ever thought they could, to reach for apparently impossible goals, to put personal interests aside (at least temporarily) in favor of some larger group purpose. According to Morgan, persuasion means changing someone's mind and if the mind isn't changed, the person hasn't been persuaded. So a leader's job is to change minds, to push followers to make new decisions. Because persuasion lies squarely at the center of leadership, of changing minds and making decisions, an emotional process is central to what successful leaders do. More than that, it's a process that requires both intellectual finesse and nonverbal skill.

It can be said that a successful leader, in other words, has to be comfortable with emotional arguments and comfortable making and responding to those arguments. Self-awareness is critical; understanding your own emotional tendencies and responses is essential if you're going to evoke and shape emotional responses in others.

In conclusion, leadership is persuasion. Persuasion is emotional. Emotion is unconscious. Leaders need to master their unconscious emotional thought processes in order to succeed. It's essential work for anyone who wants to persuade others to achieve anything worthwhile.

About the Author

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