

Persuasion Science for Leaders

Published: SA Journal of Strategic Marketing 2019

Breakthrough discoveries in psychology have exposed neurobiological keys to persuasion.

A great future career is a return of the “human skills” — *leading, negotiating, selling, and presenting* — these are skills where artificial intelligence currently can’t compete. **Ian Rheeder** looks at a holistic approach to persuasion science, offering the busy executive a clearer understanding of these four important areas of influence.

Leading, negotiating, selling and **presenting** skills are intimately interconnected and should be discussed together. For example, leading and selling are heavily intertwined. We first need to know the basics of selling before every presentation, negotiation and/or leadership interaction.



Can we motivate someone else?

Most psychologists suggest we *cannot* motivate someone else to take action. However we definitely can *influence* and *inspire* audiences by giving them a *reason* to change their behaviour. Whether conscious of it or not, we’re swayed by extrinsic and intrinsic desires (i.e. attitudes, personal values and cultural beliefs). Examples of extrinsic “outside” rewards are: money, fame and power – Napoleon realised men would die for medals. It is important to note that everyone is not motivated the same way; some really do love money.

The key to “motivating” others is to ask questions to get the right feelings flowing — an inside-out approach. If you want to be engaging, don’t show up and immediately begin presenting, leading or negotiating; rather ask questions as this has a desired neurobiological effect, getting people to think and feel deeply about what *they really want* (intrinsic motivation).

A: Trust

Trust is the central social lubricant – the basic need of our “mammalian” brain in maintaining strong relationships. Trust is the platform – the binding force – between you and your audience. Trust is sacrosanct if you want people to risk taking your advice.

Trust vs. Disgust

Trust has a massive 77% correlation whether someone enjoys your presence. This might not sound important, however leaders that are *socially and results* oriented have a massive chance of being rated great leaders vs. *results only* orientated leaders. This is because we are the most social species on earth; in fact, our social needs are treated by the brain in the same way as food and water.

It gets worse; there is no emotion between trust and disgust. We either trust someone or we do not. At best, the emotion between trust and disgust is indifference.

Multi-cultural Challenges of Trust

Trust produces oxytocin, prompting generosity and cooperation. Yet trust is like a squeeze tube – once it's squeezed out, it's difficult to push back in. And what's worse, with minimal cues, our brain's amygdala makes it's mind up in 50-milliseconds whether you are for me or against me. So train yourself up in key cultural differences and understand the norms and unwritten-ground-rules of your diverse audiences; things like handshakes and “meet & greet” norms.

One of the fastest ways to build trust is to be the first to do a small favour, which triggers reciprocal altruism. Smile warmly, do a single eyebrow-flash during the handshake and show genuine sincerity when greeting (for example, by asking relevant questions). It's difficult to fake sincerity because we pick up on the unconscious micro-signals that warn us. Once *warmth* is established, you should sound competent when you start presenting, because *competence* now fuels trust further.

Love vs. Indifference

The opposite emotion of love is not hate, but *indifference*. We see others as indifferent until proven loving; especially when they don't look like us. So armed with this self-awareness, how do we combat this potential split-second biasing in business? How do we swiftly come across as a kind person? How do we prevent a disturbing “Us vs. Them” situation from developing? The answer comes from neuroscience: We treat people like relatives when they *feel* like relatives. Would you be more inclined to risk donating one kidney to a relative or a stranger? Well, it depends on how they make you *feel*.

Fairness is a basic need: By eavesdropping on the brain, neuroscience illuminates why, when we are attempting to persuade, we need to make the other party feel like they are liked and being treated fairly. Mention ‘win-win’, do a favour or concede on something small. By studying hunter-gatherers, one of the biggest causes for murdering someone is refusal to share meat fairly; thus one of the best investments in the future is to put food in other people's stomachs now.

Status is a basic need:

Hurting a person's status makes them angry. Force passengers to walk through first class when boarding an aeroplane and there's an 800% higher chance of “air rage” in the economy class section.

In South Africa we have a high Power Distance Index (PDI) between races and genders. When there is a PDI between two people (e.g. a male doctor's high status vs. a female nurse), the fearful one loses blood in their

prefrontal cortex. This “PDI stress” in the cockpit of Korean Air caused 1700% more accidents than American Airlines. Why? The crew were too scared to offer their higher ranking pilot advice! The solution? By just getting onto first name terms dropped the PDI and got them working as a team.

B: Engagement

Once trust is established, engagement is welcomed.

Presenting Tips: When presenting, establishing credibility is crucial. There should be four distinct parts when presenting: 1) A credible Intro, 2) The Problem, 3) The Solution, and 4) The Next Steps (i.e. ask for commitment).

Leadership Tips: Leaders have a much longer opportunity to engage with their followers than a fleeting 30-min presentation. Once the leader has established trust through displaying shared values, accountability, integrity, authenticity and transparency, the follower will be open to their engagement. Leaders need to now engage by: 1) having an inspirational shared vision 2) being approachable (sociable), and 3) being compassionate.

Selling & Negotiating Tips: Negotiations is “selling on steroids”. We start by building trust, however selling becomes a negotiation when parties object to a proposal. Trust is initially established through great preparation, positive body language, questioning, small-talk, uncovering needs, developing solutions and a great engaging proposal. However, receiving and objection to a proposal requires flawless objection handling.

Summary

This article has touched on two breakthrough persuasion levers; the lightning speed of *trust* vs. disgust, and the knife-edge of *love* vs. indifference.

We need to *genuinely want to help* others by putting them first; show warmth (trust) before displaying competence. Only then will they want to know what you have to offer.

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