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Power And Influence

Persuasion Depends Mostly on the Audience

And it's mostly irrational. **by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic**

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Dale Carnegie once noted that the only way to get someone to do something is to get that person to *want* to do something. Thus all persuasion is ultimately self-persuasion. Even if I put a gun to your head, you are still free to decide what to do, albeit admittedly somewhat constrained.

Scientific meta-analyses show that we are more likely to be persuaded when requests are congruent with our values, self-image, and future goals. In other words, people are easily persuaded of that which they wanted to do in the first place. As the French philosopher Blaise Pascal

noted: "People are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have themselves discovered than by those which have come into the mind of others."

That said, it is also clear that some people are generally more persuasive than others. These charismatic, politically savvy, and socially skilled individuals tend to be sought-after salespeople, managers, and leaders. Thanks to their higher EQ, they're better equipped to read people and are able to leverage this intuitive knowledge to influence others' attitudes and behaviors. And because they seem more authentic than their peers, we tend to trust them more, to the point of outsourcing our decision-making to them. This is what most people hope to get, but not always receive, from their politicians.

Yet we may be giving these alleged superstars of persuasion more credit than they deserve. In fact, a great deal of psychological research indicates that, much like Dale Carnegie suggested, the key triggers of persuasion take place in the *receiver* of the message, whereas persuaders typically account for less than 10% of the effect. What, then, are the main psychological forces that explain when and why we are likely to be persuaded by others? Here's what the science actually shows:

We yield to persuasion because we cannot tolerate ambiguity. Indeed, our need for closure – the desire to maintain internal consistency between our different beliefs and behaviors – can generate abrupt attitude changes and a passionate sense of certainty. For example, interviewers rate candidates more negatively when they have been given negative information about them beforehand; and most people would switch instantly from liking to disliking an idea when they find out that it was proposed by someone they dislike. By the same token, our subconscious drive for maintaining consistent thoughts and ideas can often make us immune to persuasion even in the presence of

irrevocable evidence. For instance, managers are less likely to notice mistakes in their employees when they were responsible for hiring them, because the alternative would be to admit that they were wrong, which would make them feel stupid. The bottom line is that persuasion depends more on what we think of ourselves than what we think of the message. As Nietzsche observed: "One sticks to an opinion because he prides himself on having come to it on his own, and another because he has taken great pains to learn it and is proud to have grasped it: and so both do so out of vanity."

We tend to see others as more gullible than ourselves. This so-called third-person effect is well-established and suggests that there is a comforting and ego-enhancing element in feeling more independent than our peers, and this feeling fuels our self-deception. In line with this, we are generally more capable of spotting persuasion attempts when they are directed at others than at ourselves. Even when scientists explain this to laypeople, most still see themselves as less gullible than others, much like with other better-than-average biases.

Few things are more persuasive than fear. With the exception of psychopaths, the most effective way to persuade people is by activating their threat-detection mechanisms. This explains why people are generally more motivated to avoid losing something they perceive they have (e.g., love, health, money) than gaining something they may want to have. "Buy this and you'll live longer" is generally less effective than "buy this or you'll die sooner."

Persuasion is emotional first and rational second. Indeed, we are more likely to yield to persuasion in order to maintain or attain certain mood states than in order to gain knowledge or advance our thinking. When someone makes us feel good – intentionally or not – we will be more likely to agree with their views and be persuaded by them.

In persuasion, warmth and empathy go a lot further than logic and evidence. It is for this reason that much of advertising targets our emotional processes. That said, it is important that these attempts are subtle, so that they seem genuine. Over-the-top manifestations of warmth will seem as fake and artificial and deliberately manipulative as those Super Bowl commercials with cute puppies stranded in the rain.

In short, effective persuasion highlights the irrationality of human thinking. We may be living in a data-driven world, but that does not make people more logical. This is why the same people may regard an idea as absurd one day, and amazing the next. As Arthur Schopenhauer noted: "All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident."

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Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic is the Chief Innovation Officer at ManpowerGroup, a professor of business psychology at University College London and at Columbia University, co-founder of deepersignals.com, and an associate at Harvard's Entrepreneurial Finance Lab. He is the author of *Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders? (and How to Fix It)*, upon which his TEDx talk was based. His latest book is *I, Human: AI, Automation, and the Quest to Reclaim What Makes Us Unique*. Find him at www.drtomas.com.

@drtcp

