10 ways to be more persuasive and win your case

By Calvin Sun

The good news: You know the future. The bad news: No one believes you.

It's hard to imagine any frustration greater than that of the mythological Cassandra, who knew the future but was cursed by being disbelieved. Though, for example, Cassandra understood the treachery behind the Trojan Horse, her warnings about it went unheeded, and Troy was destroyed. (In the context of the modern office, she would have received all of the blame.)

Being a Cassandra in your work can hinder your career. Although technical ability is important, equally important is the ability to persuade others (co-workers, clients, or bosses) that your ideas merit action.

Below are tips on how you can be more persuasive. Of course, these tips aren't a silver bullet. You still might fail to persuade -- or the other person might have better arguments. However, following these suggestions may increase your chances of success and decrease your chances of being a modern-day Cassandra.

As we go through these tips, let's consider an example: Say you've created a policy you'd like your end users to follow but that you know will generate (or has generated) opposition. Suppose you want them to contact your help desk when they encounter a problem, instead of calling a specific person in the IT department.

1 Show how the other person benefits from listening to you

Sun Tzu, in his classic *The Art of War*, said that a person who knows both the enemy and himself need not fear the result of a hundred battles. Apply this principle when persuading other people. They care more about the benefits to themselves than to you.

In the help desk example, calling the help desk could result in faster problem resolution. Therefore, stress that fact when talking to the user, rather than, for example, the fact that the IT department will be able to track calls better.

2 Have answers to objections

Even if people agree with the benefits you've outlined, they might raise objections to your idea. How are you going to react? If you've thought about the Sun Tzu teaching of point 1, you may have already anticipated those objections and can resolve them. The more you anticipate and prepare to answer objections, the greater your chances of persuasion.

A user might not want to call the help desk because he knows Joe in IT can answer his question quickly. To address this objection, you might ask what would happen if Joe were sick, on vacation, or otherwise unavailable. What if you can't answer the objection? Be honest about it. At the same time, however, you still might be able to persuade the user that other benefits outweigh his or her objection.

3 Ask questions when possible, rather than make statements

If you or someone you know has attended law school, you've probably heard of the Socratic method of teaching. Instead of giving answers, the professor asks questions. In answering the questions, students gain their own answers. This method may take longer, but it can be more effective than simply giving an answer.

Your end user prefers to call Joe instead of the help desk. Rather than state the problems with that approach, what if you instead asked questions such as, "What would happen if you left Joe a voicemail, but he was out sick for three days?"

4 Have supporting evidence in hardcopy

Rightly or wrongly, referring to a printout or a document during your discussion adds to your credibility and persuasiveness. Of course, the document should be relevant. Don't try to bluff someone, as some lawyers do during trial by having a simple phone book at their table to intimidate the witness who may think it's something else. If you're caught, your credibility is destroyed.

For the help desk scenario, for example, what remedy reports could you produce to support your policy? Perhaps you could show differences in response time between users who called the help desk initially versus those who didn't.

5 Confront with the evidence

Using hardcopy reports and citing authorities lets you avoid confronting the other person with just your own evidence. This practice is especially important if you believe there's a danger that the other person will shoot the messenger. Suppose you have to talk with your director about the high level of end-user dissatisfaction. Who among us wants to simply tell the director that, "End users are unhappy"? It's far better to show an opinion survey summary or chart of responses and let that information speak for itself.

6 Get third-party testimonials

I conducted a customer service program once for a university information technology group. One person in that session gave me a good-natured hard time, challenging me on various topics. A few weeks later, though, his boss told me that that person totally changed his impression during the program and afterward told everyone what a good program is was and how wrong he had been to have an initial negative attitude.

Such people are invaluable to you, so be good to them. The most effective ones are those like my "problem attendee." They are the ones who have the greatest swing in opinion, from highly negative to highly positive. Bringing them to talk with whomever you need to persuade can have a big impact. So in the case of the help desk, you might consider calling on a supervisor or manager who now is convinced of the value of calling the help desk.

7 Show cost-benefit analysis

This point involves more than just showing that benefits outweigh costs. It also covers those situations where someone argues that your proposed idea really doesn't appear to offer any benefits, or that the benefits appear in only a small number of situations. To answer this objection, ask about the costs or risks involved. If there is little risk or cost, the idea should be considered because the benefits still justify it.

8 Acknowledge weaknesses in your position

Acknowledging any weaknesses in your position gives you credibility because it shows you have examined your own arguments. However, you shouldn't dwell on those weaknesses. Consider instead a statement such as, "Now, is this position totally problem free? Of course not. There still is an issue with [x]. Even so, we still should continue because…."

9   **Set expectations for the other person**

Closely tied to the previous point is the idea of setting expectations on the part of those you're trying to convince. What issues are involved if they agree with your course of action? The worst thing you can do is lead someone to believe everything will go smoothly, only to encounter problems later. What risks are involved and what can you do to minimize them? Just as you acknowledge weaknesses, acknowledge these potential problems and risks. Doing so gives you greater credibility.

10   **Address buyer's remorse**

The concept of buyer's remorse originally arose in connection with consumers making major purchases, then second-guessing themselves. Now, however, it applies figuratively to any doubts someone has about a big decision. To maintain good relations with this person, and to be consistent with the first point (about knowing the other person), take a moment to reinforce the wisdom of the decision. How you do it is up to you and how well you know the person. You could be earnest and sincere, saying simply, "Thanks, I appreciate it, you made the right decision," or you could be jocular and say, "You are a GENIUS!"

Persuading people need not be a difficult task. Knowing people's objectives, having answers to their objections, and considering their point of view increases your chances of being persuasive.

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