# *In Practice*

## Principles of Persuasion

### *Michael Watkins*

*Drawing on the literatures on negotiation, communication, and persua-sion as well as his research on organizational transformation, the author proposes a framework for understanding and enacting the persuasion process in organizations. He lays out key goals of persuasion and ways that skilled leaders can manage the process. The framework focuses atten-tion on the ways leaders shape perceptions of interests and alternatives, as well as how they persuade one-on-one and from a distance. He also high-lights the importance of gaining acceptance of tough, unpopular decisions, noting that the way leaders manage the process can have a major impact on outcomes in such situations.*

In a world of flatter and more networked organizations, formal authority is rarely sufficient to get things done. Leaders also need the power to per-suade. This is true whether you are leading a team, a business or a nation; whether or not you have a position with substantial authority; whether you are working inside your organization or dealing with influential outsiders. Effectiveness in persuasion is a core leadership skill, one that is frequently (if not always) directly related to negotiation.

Successful persuasion is, in fact, a negotiation that results in concrete impacts on the behavior of other people or organizations. It may be suffi-

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cient to gain others' compliance or necessary to gain their active support and hence to change their attitudes. Regardless, leaders must be able to elicit desired changes through dialogue one-on-one and in small groups, as well as through speeches and memos directed at broader audiences. This essay outlines a framework for undertaking five core persuasion tasks:

- *mapping the influence landscape* — identifying who needs to be persuaded and how they can be influenced;
- *shaping perceptions of interests* — influencing others' beliefs about what they want;
- *shaping perceptions of alternatives*— influencing others' beliefs about the options open to them;
- *gaining acceptance for tough decisions* — designing consultation and decision-making processes that increase the likelihood that difficult choices will be accepted; and
- *persuading at a distance* —achieving a broader impact through mass persuasion.

## The Challenge at White Goods Inc.

Each of these tasks will be examined in the context of a set of challenge that confronted Dana Monosoff, the newly hired chief operating officer of White Goods, Inc., an established manufacturer of high-end kitchen appliances. ("White Goods," the scenario described here, and all persons mentioned are fictional, but are based on a compilation of data from several actual case histories.)

Sales at White Goods had been flat for several years prior to Dana's arrival. Nimbler and more aggressive competitors had begun to chip away at the firm's traditional quality advantage by introducing new materials and production technologies. Even more ominously, the way products were sold and distributed was changing. While White Goods was continuing to rely on the network of independent dealers that sold and serviced its kitchen appliances, its most formidable competitors had begun to establish long-term ties with large retail stores. Some had even begun to manufacture private-label appliances for them. Dana expected these trends to accelerate.

Dana was the first senior executive hired from outside the company in 15 years. Brought in by White Goods' chief executive officer, Paul Schofield, to get growth back on track, she had been promised that if she did well she would succeed Paul as CEO within a few years. But Dana was convinced that producing moderately priced products for large stores was the way to go, and she knew that such a move would not be an easy sell. A decision to market through large outlets would anger the dealers and could erode White Goods' tight control over sales and servicing channels. Moreover, producing lower-priced offerings was at odds with White Goods' proud tradition of manufacturing premium products.

## Task One: Mapping the Influence Landscape

Sometimes it is sufficient to convince a single person, but leaders typically must build *supportive coalitions* among many different interest groups to secure support for their initiatives. It is also often necessary to neutralize opponents and prevent the formation of *blocking coalitions*. When coalitions must be built or broken (or prevented from forming), it is essential to step back and map the influence landscape before beginning to design a persuasion strategy.

Dana's ultimate goal was to build support for her strategy and to prevent opposition from coalescing. Simply dictating change would have generated both overt and covert resistance, undermining her position; it could even have cost her job. Consequently, she sought to identify the key people and groups whose support was crucial, as well as potential opponents. The CEO, Paul Schofield, would obviously have to be on board. But other top-level executives would influence him, so she had to figure out who else in the organization she needed to persuade.

### Identifying the Key Groups

The first step is to identify the groups in which support must be built and opposition neutralized. In a merger, the companies' top management, analysts, and shareholders are targets for influence. In influencing government legislation, public opinion is important and the press plays a key role. When persuasion is aimed at multiple groups, distinct strategies must be crafted for each.

Dana needed to build support in top management, the sales and distribution organization, and the manufacturing work force. Successful persuasion in the top-management arena required that she cultivate and retain the confidence of the CEO, peers, and top-level subordinates. The changes Dana envisioned required shifts in power relationships that could create winners and losers among key players who had long-standing relationships with the CEO and each other. In addition, she needed to figure out how to deal with potential opposition from White Goods' sales force and network of independent dealers. Her third task at this stage was to build a base of trust and respect with the workforce in order to convince them of the need to manufacture less expensive (and less prestigious) products.

The next step is to map the key subgroups within each group. The leader should probe the forces that bind these groups together and assess their interests, the issues likely to evoke forceful responses from them, and their scope for opposing or supporting her agenda. Important types of subgroups often include:

- *organizational units* consisting of employees bound together by common training and expertise or by shared tasks and supervision;

- *identity groups*, bound together by shared occupation, age, gender, race, or social class, that protect the interests and promote the mutual solidarity of the people they represent; and

- *power coalitions* made up of people who have banded together opportunistically to advance or protect a set of shared interests, but who may not otherwise identify with or socialize with each other.[1]

The history of relationships within and among key groups, and analysis of their characteristic patterns of cooperation and conflict, can offer striking insights into how to deal with them. In analyzing patterns of cooperation, it is useful to keep in mind two primary bases for intergroup alliances: shared interests (things we both care about) and opportunistic trades (you support things I care about and I'll support you).[2] Because groups may cooperate on some issues and not on others, coalitions may be somewhat fluid, with membership shifts depending on the particular decisions to be made.

### Analyzing Influence Networks

The next step is to analyze influence networks — established patterns that characterize who defers to whom on crucial issues.[3] This analysis can identify *opinion leaders* who exert disproportionate influence on decision making.[4] Convincing these pivotal individuals of the need for change translates into broad acceptance, and resistance on their part could galvanize broader opposition.

Dana's analysis of influence networks in top management at White Goods convinced her that Todd Simpson, the vice president of sales, was pivotal. A career employee strongly invested in the company's traditions, Todd had risen through the sales ranks to become a trusted adviser to the CEO, Paul Schofield. Todd's support was crucial for Dana's proposed change initiatives. He would be influenced by his direct reports, the regional sales directors, who would in turn come under pressure from White Goods' independent dealers. But Todd was also respected by both groups and capable of influencing them.

Dana then analyzed what it would take to move down-market to lower-priced products, concluding that she would also need to win the support of Sarah Wolverton, vice president of manufacturing, and Nathan Simon, vice president of engineering. Both were influential with the CEO, though less so than Todd, and both deferred to Todd on matters pertaining to company culture and traditions. Dana had begun to develop a relationship with Nathan, but had not worked much with Sarah. The resulting influence network is illustrated in Figure One, in which the strength of relationships is represented by the thickness of the connecting arrows.

**Figure One**
**Influence Diagram**
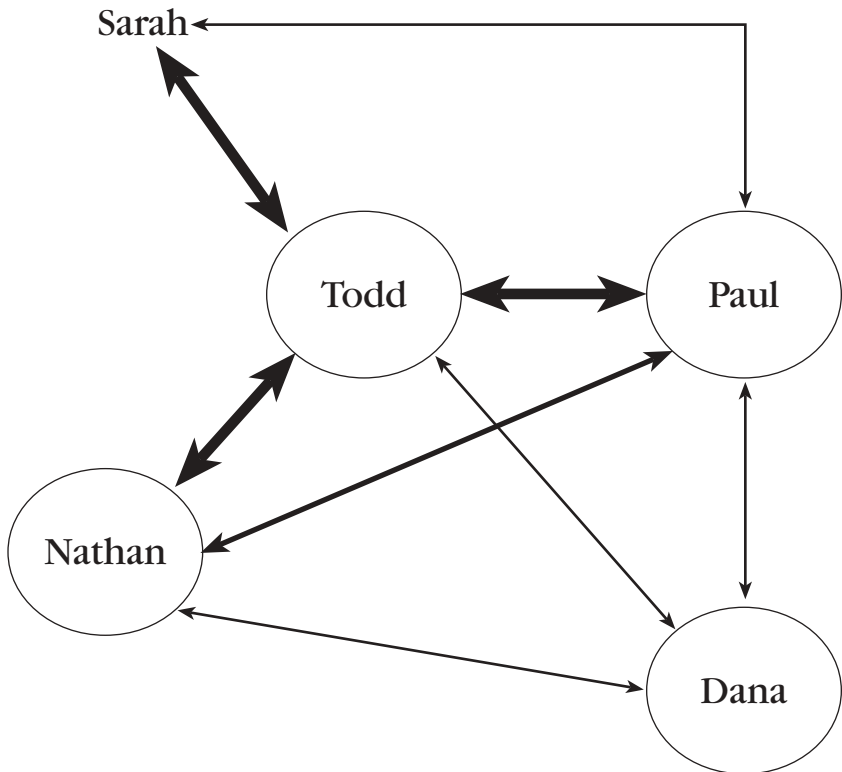


### Identifying Supporters, Opponents, and "Persuadables"

Some people will endorse the leader's agenda early on because it advances their own interests. But identifying people as supporters doesn't mean that you can take them for granted. It's never enough to simply solidify support; you have to maintain it to ensure that support doesn't slip away in the night, and to expand their own persuasive reach by helping allies become more persuasive, leaders must devote energy to buttressing and deepening the commitment of their supporters. In the words of Owen Harries (1984: 57):

> Preaching to the converted, far from being a superfluous activity, is vital. Preachers do it every Sunday. The strengthening of the commitment, intellectual performance, and morale of those already on your side is an

essential task, both in order to bind them more securely to the cause and to make them more effective exponents of it.

Meanwhile, some important players will oppose your efforts whatever you do. But identifying people as opponents does not mean that you can ignore them. In analyzing potential opponents, you should strive to answer the following questions: How long have efforts to organize opposition been going on? Is the opposition united by long-standing relationships and shared interests or by short-term opportunism? Are there linchpins whose conversion or neutralization would substantially weaken resistance?

Because persuasion consumes valuable time and emotional energy (which should not be wasted on the irrevocably opposed), it is essential to assess early on who can be persuaded. If, for example, Todd were not persuadable, Dana would be well advised to start elsewhere and hope to bring him on board later. But Dana perceived Todd as a thoughtful, forward-looking person; she considered him persuadable. She was confident that she had a strong case and could support it with logical arguments and on sales-trend data, but she also knew that Todd might still oppose change.

### Assessing Interests

Having identified initial targets for persuasion, the next step is to zero in on their *interests*. What do Todd and the regional sales managers care about? Put yourself in the targets' shoes; the key is to understand what they perceive their interests to be, not what you believe they *should be*. Faced with change of the kind Dana envisioned, Todd and others could resist for a variety of reasons:

- *Loss of a comfortable status quo.* They see no reason to change in ways that might reduce their earnings or alter established patterns of social interaction.

- *Challenge to one's sense of competence.* They fear feeling incompetent and unable to perform as required in the post-change environment.

- *Threats to self-defining values.* They believe that change will result in a culture that fails to honor traditional notions of what is valuable and rewards behaviors antithetical to their self-image.

- *Potential loss of security due to uncertainty about the future.* They misunderstand or fear the intended consequences of a proposed change.

- *Negative consequences for key allies.* They fear the consequences for others they care about or are beholden to.

Dana concluded that Todd might oppose a dramatic shift in distribution strategy out of concern both for White Goods' premium image and for the impact on his organization. She knew that Todd would come under strong pressure from others inside and outside the company. Many regional sales directors would oppose a change that could fundamentally undermine their

status and might affect their compensation. Todd would also hear from dealers (many of whom had close relationships with the regional salespeople) who would view a decision to sell through large stores as a threat to their businesses. Clearly, she faced an uphill battle to gain Todd's support for the initiative.

### Assessing Driving and Restraining Forces

People facing tough decisions experience psychological tension as opposing sets of forces push them in conflicting directions.[5] The source of tension might be internal conflicts (Do I want X more than Y? Should I do what I *want* to do or what I think I *should* do?) or external social pressures, such as competing prior commitments or concern about what respected people will think (see Bazerman et al. 1998). Ultimately, a person decides that the benefits of going in one direction outweigh the costs of not going in others.
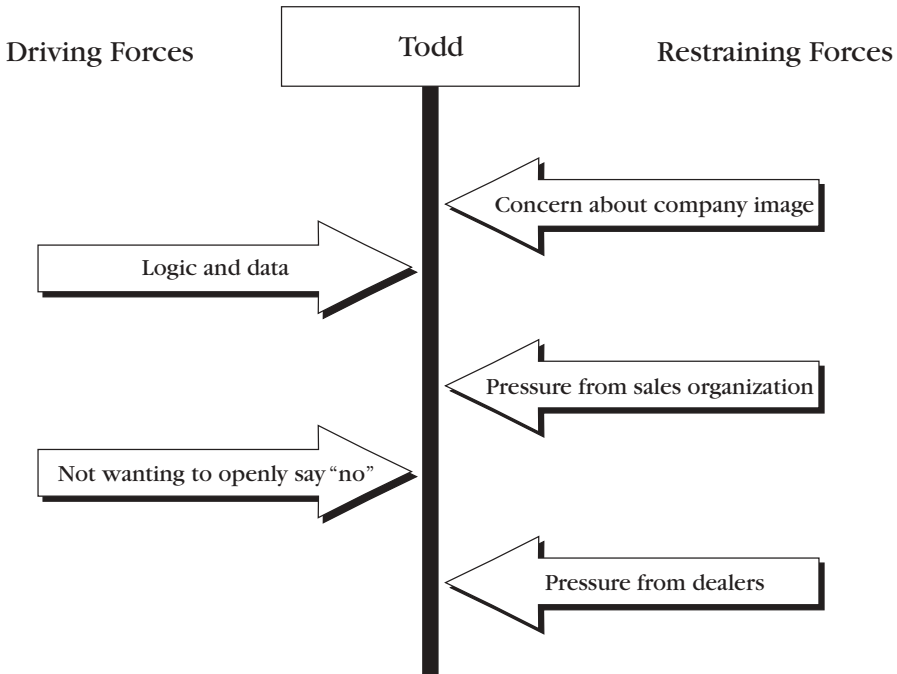
You can therefore deepen your analysis of interests by probing the *driving and restraining forces* acting on prospective targets of your influence. Driving forces push targets in the direction you desire; restraining forces push them in other directions. The key is to find ways to strengthen the driving forces, weaken the restraining forces, or both. Dana extended her analysis by assessing the driving and restraining forces acting on Todd, as illustrated in the force-field diagram in Figure Two. The driving forces that would lead Todd to support Dana's initiative include the logic and data that support her case and, perhaps, reluctance to openly oppose her. The restraining forces include his desire to protect White Goods' culture and the pressures exerted on him by sales directors and dealers. On the face of it, the driving forces look like thin reeds when arrayed against the powerful restraining forces.

### Identifying Alternatives

The next step is to identify and evaluate how key people perceive their *alternatives* to behaving in the desired manner. For Dana, this means predicting the actions Todd and other potential opponents might take. There is, for example, the question of whether resistance to persuasion will be overt or covert. Todd could simply withhold support or, more subtly, raise questions about the risks of Dana's proposals. He could do this alone or in concert with others, such as the regional sales managers. A blocking coalition of Todd and the regional sales managers would seriously threaten Dana's change agenda.

While Todd's influence with Paul, the CEO, is certainly sufficient to stall Dana's efforts, not everyone with reason to resist change has the power to do so. Leaders should ask themselves: Is resistance by opposing coalitions likely to be active or passive? What forms might it take? More generally, how do key people perceive their specific alternatives and how might these perceptions be altered? A clear understanding of the latter can significantly strengthen your influence strategies.

**Figure Two**
**A Force-Field Analysis**

| Driving Forces | Todd | Restraining Forces |

Concern about company image

Logic and data

Pressure from sales organization

Not wanting to openly say "no"

Pressure from dealers

## Task Two: Shaping Perceptions of Interests

At this point, the leader is ready to devise strategies to shape others' percep-
tions of their *interests* — what they care about and the goals they want to
achieve. The main approaches to transforming perceptions of interests are:
altering incentives; framing decisions; drawing on the power of social influ-
ence; and engaging in quid-pro-quo negotiation.

### Altering Incentives

Changing the incentive systems within which people operate — introducing
rewards for desired behavior, imposing disincentives for undesired behavior,
or both — can alter their perceptions of their interests. To the extent that
people strive to get the rewards or avoid the disincentives, their behavior
(but not necessarily their attitudes) will change.

　　Measurement systems, compensation plans, mission statements, strate-
gic plans, annual budgets, and the like are powerful levers for influencing
behavior in organizations. They depend for their effectiveness on authority,

fear, and the expectation of reward: by setting expectations and defining rewards and punishments, they push people in desired directions. Such measures can be especially effective in the short term, and they are usually necessary when significant behavioral change is called for.

Dana should think through how compensation might work for the regional sales directors under the new system, and how incentives could be structured for dealers. A proposal that responds positively to their concerns would weaken a potent restraining force.

### *Framing Decisions*

Framing is the use of argument, analogy, and metaphor to create a favorable definition of the problem to be solved and the set of potential solutions. Mitchell (1970: 111) characterized framing as "a burning glass which collects and focuses the diffuse warmth of popular emotions, concentrating them on a specific issue."

Framing is a powerful tool in negotiation because: (1) people's perceptions of their interests remain latent and diffuse until they are faced with a choice; and (2) people perceive their interests differently depending on how choices are posed.

Dana ought to frame the proposed change in a way that elevates the importance of some interests while suppressing other interests or keeping them dormant. This is accomplished by linking her agenda to people's needs, wants, and aspirations, and linking choices she opposes to their worries and fears. Done well, this approach taps into the powerful emotional forces that strongly influence individual choice. Effective framing involves the use of a number of techniques, including:

- *Invoking the common good.* This approach involves emphasizing collective benefits and downplaying individual costs. Dana could stress the overarching importance to the organization of getting sales growth back on track, and attempt to frame the costs to Todd and his people as a sacrifice that must be made for the common good.

- *Linking to core values.* Marketers and propagandists long ago learned the power of linking choices to the values that define self-identity. Thus, cigarette companies link smoking to independence and the freedom to choose. Dana could tap into Todd's identification with the company's tradition of producing high-quality products by affirming her support for it and emphasizing that sales growth would support the investments in new technologies needed to sustain it.

- *Heightening concerns about loss or risk.* Some framing techniques exploit biases in the ways that people make decisions. Many people tend to be loss-averse — that is, more sensitive to potential losses than to equivalent potential gains.[6] Desired courses of action should thus be cast in terms of potential gains, and undesired choices in terms of potential

losses. Similarly widespread is the tendency to be risk-averse — to prefer guaranteed gains to risky choices, even if the latter are likely to yield much larger gains.[7] Here again, desired courses of action can be characterized as less risky, undesired choices as more risky. Dana could dwell on the negative consequences of not getting sales growth back on track, including vulnerability to takeover and loss of control over the organization's destiny.

- *Rejection and retreat.* Another technique for shaping perceptions of interests is to ask for a lot initially, and then to settle for less. This works because people tend to "anchor" on the initial request and to view subsequent moves toward a more moderate request as concessions.[8] Dana could propose to sell exclusively through large stores, and then "retreat" to a plan to sell only mid-range lines through large stores, reserving the premium lines for the existing dealers. The risk is that an extreme initial request might trigger resistance and the coalescence of a blocking coalition.

- *Narrowing or broadening the scope.* Sometimes choices are best posed broadly, at other times narrowly. A choice that could be construed as setting an undesirable precedent might best be framed as a highly circumscribed, isolated situation independent of other decisions. Other choices might be better situated within the context of a higher-level set of issues. Dana could frame the distribution decision as a narrow initiative involving a few mid-range lines of appliances, or broaden the focus by emphasizing the strategic importance of countering competitors.

- *Enlarging the pie.* Choices perceived as win-lose propositions are particularly difficult to sell. Broadening the range of issues under consideration can facilitate mutually beneficial trades that "enlarge the pie."[9] Along with the proposal to sell through large stores, Dana might put on the table issues she knows to be important to Todd. Her earlier analyses might have revealed, for example, that Todd wants to adopt a state-of-the-art sales-tracking system.

- *Neutralizing toxic issues.* Progress can be stalled by the presence of "toxic" issues. Toxic issues can sometimes be neutralized by explicitly setting them aside for future consideration, or by making up-front commitments that allay anxieties. Dana could explicitly manifest her commitment to the dealer network by proposing a two-tier distribution system in which mid-to-low-range products would be sold in large stores and mid-to-high-range products through dealers.

- *Inoculating against expected challenges.* As far back as Aristotle, persuaders have been advised to inoculate their audiences against the arguments they expect their opponents to make. Presenting and decisively refuting weak forms of expected counter-arguments immunizes audiences against the same arguments when they are advanced in more

potent forms. Dana should prepare responses to the objections she anticipates from the regional sales directors and dealers. She might say to Todd: "I know that your people are likely to be concerned about X, but the issue is really Y."

- *Providing a script for convincing others.* Successful framing not only influences the immediate target, but also provides that person a persuasive script for convincing others. As she frames her arguments, Dana should keep in mind that Todd will have to sell them to the regional sales directors and dealers. Her arguments should explicitly address their concerns.

### Using Social Influence

People rarely make important choices independently; most people are influenced by their networks of relationships and the opinions of key advisers. Understanding and influencing these relationship networks dramatically increases one's ability to persuade key people to support a change initiative. The knowledge that a highly respected person already supports an initiative alters others' assessments of its attractiveness, its likelihood of success, and the potential costs of not getting on board. Convincing opinion leaders to make commitments of support and mobilize their own networks can have a powerful leveraging effect. Likewise, a leader who has been successful in building political capital with key people can draw on reciprocity to gain a buy-in.

Todd's assessment of the costs and benefits of supporting or opposing Dana's initiative will be strongly influenced by the opinions and expectations of those in his network of relationships. It is thus important for Dana to understand the full range of pressures that could impinge on Todd. Research in social psychology has established that people prefer choices that enable them to:

- *Remain consistent with strongly held values and beliefs*, which tend to be shared with important reference groups. People asked to engage in behavior inconsistent with their values or beliefs experience internal psychological "dissonance," external social sanction, or both.

- *Remain consistent with their prior commitments*, because failure to honor commitments tends to incur social sanctions. People prefer not to make choices that require them to reverse themselves or that overtly constrain their future choices by setting undesirable precedents.

- *Preserve their sense of control.* Choices that threaten position in a social hierarchy and sense of control are likely to provoke anxiety.

- *Repay obligations.* Reciprocity is a strong social norm, and people are vulnerable to appeals for support that invoke past favors they have received.

- *Preserve their reputations.* Choices that preserve or enhance one's reputation are viewed favorably, those that could jeopardize one's reputation negatively.

- *Gain the approval of respected others*, such as opinion leaders, mentors, experts others to whom people look for clues about "right thinking."[10]

All else being equal, Todd will readily make choices that appear consistent with his values and prior commitments, maintain his status, repay obligations, enhance his reputation, and gain the approval of respected others. He will assiduously avoid choices that are inconsistent with his values, require him to renege on prior commitments, create undesirable precedents, undermine his sense of control, make him appear ungrateful, damage his reputation, and incur disapproval from respected others.

To harness the power of social influence, leaders often employ some of the following approaches:

- *Leveraging small commitments into larger ones.* A person who has been induced to make small and apparently innocuous commitments has already started down the slippery slope to larger ones.[11] This approach to persuasion, or *entanglement*, presumes that people can be led from point A to point B in a succession of small, irreversible steps when doing so in a single leap would be impossible. Note too that public commitments carry more weight than private commitments. Commitments made in private often afford "wiggle room"; you can argue, for example, that you were misunderstood or misquoted. Backing away from commitments made in front of others is significantly more difficult. This is why key decisions and public commitments to specific goals should be made in group meetings: it puts people's reputations on the line. This is also why the *first-mover advantage* in securing early commitments is substantial; once your opponents secure commitments of support, the battle is uphill. In addition to making a good case, you must also help targets of persuasion find ways to gracefully disentangle themselves from prior commitments.

- *Drawing on the power of reciprocity.* The desire to reciprocate is a strong motivating force.[12] Because Todd's relationship with his regional sales directors involves well-established expectations of mutual support, he will be loath to betray those expectations. Dana can begin to counter this stance by judiciously cultivating a sense of obligation in Todd, perhaps by helping advance goals that are important to him. The resulting debt provides a source of capital on which she can draw when the time comes to push her initiative. Note that favors do not necessarily have to be precisely balanced. Studies have shown that small favors can be leveraged into disproportionately large reciprocal favors. It is important to keep this principle in mind with respect not only to influencing others but also to resisting others' attempts at persuasion.

- *Using behavior change to drive attitude change.* It is well known that attitudinal changes can translate into significant behavioral changes, but often overlooked that the reverse can be true: changing someone's behavior can change the person's attitudes.[13] People have a strong need for consistency; induced to try something new, they are likely to adjust their attitudes to be consistent with the behavior. For example, Dana might try to involve Todd in a study of ways to make a two-tier distribution system work. Having worked on the study and helped to shape its conclusions, Todd's attitudes might shift to become consistent with his actions.

- *Sequencing through relationship networks.* Faced with difficult choices, people often look to respected others for clues about "right thinking." Such opinion leaders might be sought out because of their expertise or experience, because they have access to key information, or simply because they have authoritative personalities. Whatever the source of their stature, it is important to understand how key people formulate opinions about important issues. As noted earlier, this is done by tracing patterns of who defers to whom on key issues.[14] If, for example, Todd defers to senior people in other functions on issues of company strategy, it is important to secure the support of these people first. Dana should draw up a *sequencing plan* to help her decide when and in what order to approach people in order to form a coalition and build momentum before she gets to Todd.[15] Leaders should also carefully plan the sequence of individual and group meetings. Dana could meet individually with those whom Todd trusts. Having won their support, she could raise the issue for discussion in a group meeting attended by Todd, and then follow up with a one-on-one meeting with Todd.

### Engaging in Quid-Pro-Quo Negotiation

Finally, if key people cannot otherwise be brought along, it may be necessary to engage them in a this-for-that negotiation, agreeing to support a project or initiative they care about in exchange for their support of yours. Success rests on understanding the full set of interests at stake — which may include reputation and prestige as well as tangible and more obvious needs — and on knowing how to craft a suitable trade. Support can often be bought. The question is: at what cost? Leaders who don't know when to stop buying support can end up making compromises that dilute their efforts. Artful use of incentives, framing, social influence, and quid-pro-quo negotiation will strengthen the forces driving Todd in the direction Dana favors and weaken restraining forces, as illustrated in Figure Three. With careful, thorough, and sustained effort, Dana may be able to tip the scales and get Todd to support her initiatives.
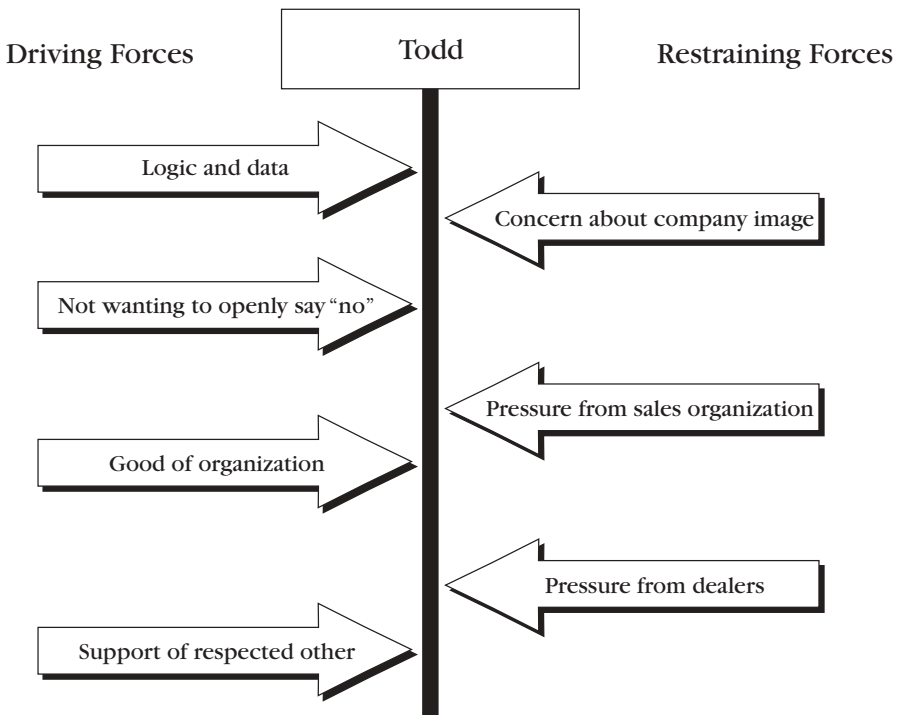
## Task Three: Shaping Perceptions of Alternatives

Shaping people's perceptions of their own interests is only half the story. The other task is influencing people's perceptions of their *alternatives*, the set of options from which they believe they must choose. This usually entails directing their attention toward alternatives you favor and eliminating less favorable choices from consideration.

### *Introducing New Options*

People are apt to perceive their alternatives too narrowly: they overlook potentially attractive alternatives, or construe them as nonviable, unduly risky, or undesirable. Often this phenomenon is a consequence of how decisions are framed. Because organizations tend to cast new choices in the same old ways, coalitions are likely to form along predictable lines.

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### Figure Three
### New Balance of Driving and Restraining Forces

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| Driving Forces | Todd | Restraining Forces |
|---|---|---|

- Logic and data →
- ← Concern about company image
- Not wanting to openly say "no" →
- Good of organization →
- ← Pressure from sales organization
- ← Pressure from dealers
- Support of respected other →

Often one can exert considerable influence simply by expanding the range of alternatives under consideration. Dana might stimulate innovation, for example, by encouraging people at White Goods to benchmark best-in-class organizations, thus exposing then to alternative approaches to familiar problems. Ideally, she would suggest an organization with a successful two-tier approach to sales. Introducing new options can provoke stress in existing coalitions, setting the stage for the creation of new ones.

### Setting the Agenda

Decision-making processes are like rivers: big decisions draw on preliminary tributary processes that define the problem, identify alternatives, and establish criteria for evaluating costs and benefits.

By the time the problem and the options have been defined, the actual choice may be a foregone conclusion. This is why it is so important to shape the decision-making agenda early on. "Pay great attention to the agenda of the debate," cautions Owen Harries (1984: 58):

> He who defines the issues and determines their priority is already well on the way to winning. . . .Diplomats, at least when they are performing effectively, understand this well, which is one reason they often appear fussy and pedantic to outsiders who have not grasped the point at issue. . . .It is just as important, and on the same grounds, to deny your opponent the right to impose his language and concepts on the debate, and to make sure you always use terms that reflect your own values, traditions, and interests.

One key to successful persuasion is thus simply to be there during the formative period — to define the terms of the debate before momentum builds in the wrong direction, or irreversible decisions are made, or too much time passes. Another is to help select the information used to define the problem and the options. Dana could, for example, commission studies to explore changes how kitchen appliances are being sold and distributed.

### Eliminating "Do Nothing" as an Option

It is all too easy, even with the best of intentions, to defer decisions, delay, and avoid committing scarce resources. When success requires the coordinated action of many people, delay by any single individual can have a cascade effect, giving others a reason not to proceed. Leaders must therefore work to eliminate "do nothing" as a viable option. Dana, for example, must decide when the time is ripe and then push to closure the decision on distribution systems. One approach is to set up *action-forcing events* — events that force people to make commitments or take actions. Meetings, review sessions, and deadlines can all provide impetus. Those who do make commitments should immediately be locked into timetables with incremental implementation milestones. Regular meetings to review progress and tough questioning of those who fail to reach agreed-on goals increase the psycho-

logical pressure to follow through. A caveat: avoid pressing for closure until the balance of forces is tipping in the right direction.

### Pruning Options

A related approach is to work toward the progressive elimination of less desirable options from consideration, funneling the decision-making process toward the choice you favor. People are rarely willing to make difficult decisions before they have exhausted less painful options. Sometimes it makes sense to let people try to make these options work, especially if you are reasonably certain that they will fail. Dana could suggest that Todd come up with a plan for changing the distribution system and see what he proposes. If it doesn't work, she will be in a position to say, "OK, now we try it my way." Pruning of options is often necessary to provide a defensible rationale for a decision, to diffuse responsibility for unpleasant outcomes, and to bring others to the point of readiness to commit. The downside is that valuable time gets consumed. Also the exploration of other approaches may make it still more difficult to implement the desired option.

## Task Four: Gaining Acceptance for Tough Decisions

Leaders must often make unpopular decisions. When someone's pet project must be shut down, spending must be curtailed, or someone must be deprived of responsibility, the key is to get people to accept the consequences of an imposed decision. Although never easy, tough decisions of these kinds can be made more palatable. Some suggestions — all derived from the path-breaking *Getting to YES* (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991) — that might help that process follow.

### Creating a Fair Process

People are more likely to accept the consequences of a difficult decision if it is the outcome of a *fair process* (see Kim and Maubergone 1997). When people believe that the decision-making process was legitimate and that their views were taken seriously, they are more likely to support implementation. Leaders who gain reputations for being thoughtful and deliberative increase the scope within which people will accept and support their choices. Those known for arbitrariness, thoughtlessness, and apparent disregard for equity fuel resistance and furnish focal points around which opposition can mobilize.

### Engaging in Shared Diagnosis

Getting people involved in the diagnosis of organizational problems is a form of entanglement: involvement in the diagnosis makes it more difficult for people to deny the need for tough decisions and negotiating those changes. By the end of such a process, people are often willing to accept outcomes they would never have accepted at the outset. This is another reason for Dana to get Todd and other key people engaged in an analysis of changes in the way appliances are being distributed.

### Consulting Before Deciding

Consultation promotes buy-in. Dana should consider consulting throughout White Goods about what should be done to meet the emerging challenge from competitors and to explore the role of large retail stores in the market. In addition to acceptance of the eventual decision, doing so could deepen her grasp of the state of play in the organization.

Good consultation means active listening (see Rogers and Roethlisberger [1952].) Posing questions and encouraging people to voice their real concerns, then summarizing and feeding back what you have heard, signals that you are paying attention and taking the conversation seriously. The power of active listening as a persuasive technique is vastly underrated. It can not only promote acceptance of difficult decisions, but also channel people's thinking and frame choices. Because the questions leaders ask and the way they summarize and feed back responses powerfully affect people's perceptions, active listening and framing are a particularly potent persuasive pairing.

### Giving What Is Asked For

It is disconcerting to be asked what you need in order to get something difficult done and then be given it. Having made a difficult decision, the leader asks those responsible for implementation what resources they will need to make it work. After carefully probing their assessments, the leader says, "You have it! So let's get going." This tactic is a variation on getting people to make a commitment and then holding them to it.

## Task Five: Persuading at a Distance

Finally, leaders of large organizations cannot possibly communicate one-to-one with everyone they need to persuade, so they must be proficient at persuading from a distance — communicating themes and priorities in speeches, memos, and other forms of one-to-many communication. In addition to persuading top management and the sales organization, Dana also has to win the support of the larger workforce; they are justifiably proud of the high-quality products they produce and may resent a decision to move down-market.

### Constructing Reliable Communication Channels

Just as nature abhors a vacuum, informal networks will spring up to fill communication voids in organizations. In the absence of reliable formal communication channels, people will rely on the grapevine for information about what is going on. The problem, of course, is that the grapevine introduces distortion into the communication process. Some of this distortion is unintentional, a product of error and omission in person-to-person transmission. But those seeking to advance partisan goals can also intentionally distort information. As Jowett and O'Donnell (1992: 32) put it, propaganda functions by "withholding information, releasing information at pre-deter-

mined times, releasing information in juxtaposition with other information that may influence perceptions, manufacturing information, communicating information to selective audiences, and distorting information."

Whatever their intentions, the people at the focal points of these informal communication networks have substantial power to shape the messages that reach employees. Thus leaders like Dana must preempt the grapevine by building reliable formal communication channels. Whether this means publishing a new newsletter or writing memos to the workforce or holding town meetings, the goal is direct access to the target audience.

Good communication channels transmit the right information in a timely and responsive way. It is all too easy to fall behind the communication curve, especially with respect to decisions that have negative consequences. It may seem easier to withhold bad news, particularly if the full picture is not yet available, but doing so sets up a vicious circle in which official statements come out in bits and pieces, reactively, and never catch up with the grapevine. It is wise to assume that bad news will leak out quickly; plan to be there first so you can shape the message and avoid triggering resistance unnecessarily.

### Focus and Repetition

Leaders who try to communicate too many messages at the same time often end up with a muddle. One of the core insights of research on persuasive communication is the power of focus and repetition.[16] Dana's persuasive messages are likely to take root in the minds of White Goods' workforce if they consist of a few core themes, repeated until they sink in. It is a sure sign of success when people begin to echo your themes without knowing they are doing so. Focus and repetition are effective means to this end. For instance, by the third or fourth time we hear a song on the radio, we often cannot seem to get it out of our minds. Of course, it is also possible that hearing a song so much makes us tire of it. Using precisely the same words over and over makes it apparent that you are trying to persuade, which can provoke a backlash. The art of effective communication is to repeat and elaborate core themes without sounding like a parrot.

The key for Dana was crafting the message that a move down-market need not compromise quality. In early tours of plants, Dana learned that the White Goods workforce was very proud of its products, but also ashamed that they sold only to wealthy customers. Dana could tap into this sentiment by subtly emphasizing that the new products would be ones that workers, their families and friends could afford.

### Matching the Medium to the Message

Decisions about how to communicate a message should not be made lightly. Leaders have at their disposal a variety of forums and media, including speeches, small-group meetings, town meetings, newsletters, memos, interactive videoconferences, videotapes, and web pages. News is almost always

best delivered personally, in an interactive forum such as a meeting at which people can ask questions, but complex technical and data-intensive arguments are usually best conveyed in written form (see Chapter Four in Zimbardo and Leippe [1991]). Speeches and live videoconference/town-meeting presentations are ideal for communicating broad goals, values, and inspiration. Pre-recorded video presentations, though useful for disseminating information about the progress of initiatives, can seem contrived when used to communicate a new vision. In developing her communication plan, Dana should pay attention to how people in the organization feel (or could feel) most comfortable interacting with the top leadership. Is the organization one in which senior managers meet regularly with employees in town hall formats? Are such meetings viewed as open, risk-free environments for asking questions or as one-way streets for management to tell employees how it's going to be? If the latter, Dana could send a powerful message by running a more open process.

### Introducing Powerful Simplifications

Leaders are in a position to introduce new conceptual frameworks that change how problems get posed and options get generated. Because the world is extremely complex and we cannot attend to everything, we tend to search for what Boston Consulting Group founder Bruce Henderson called "powerful simplifications" — conceptual frameworks and rules of thumb that enable us to manage complexity and figure out what to do. Problem solving, Henderson (see Ghemawat 1997) observed, often involves:

> . . . a universe of alternative choices, most of which must be discarded without more than cursory attention. . . .Hence some frame of reference is needed. . .to screen the relevance of the data, methodology and implicit value judgments. . . .[The most useful] frame of reference is the concept. Conceptual thinking is the skeleton or framework on which all other choices are sorted out.

A conceptual framework is a lens through which to view the world. Like all lenses, it focuses attention in particular ways, revealing certain things and obscuring others. People who adopt a new conceptual framework subsequently focus their attention differently, see the world differently, and hence make different choices. Visions and strategies are frameworks for, respectively, characterizing the situations that organizations are facing and the choices that will lead in desired directions. Likewise, models for analyzing strategic positions (such as Michael Porter's five-forces model)[17] or managerial systems (such as total quality management (TQM))[18] are powerful simplifications that, once adopted, powerfully shape subsequent analyses and choices.

Leaders like Dana can profoundly influence decision making by introducing new conceptual frameworks, but there are important caveats. Powerful simplifications can easily become oversimplifications, and can

occasion bad choices and disillusionment if applied indiscriminately or unthinkingly. It is important to remember that "to a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail" and that all conceptual frameworks have their limitations.

Leaders must be careful, too, not to get caught up in managerial fads. Most consultants are in the business of selling powerful simplifications, and as such they must develop new products and repackage old ones to stay in business. Educated consumers of such products understand their limitations and view their claims with skepticism.

### Building Personal Credibility

Finally, personal credibility is an important persuasive resource. Numerous studies have found the persuasiveness of messages to be strongly linked to the perceived credibility of their sources.[19] This is by no means a new observation; as Aristotle wrote in *Rhetoric*:

> Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience in a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the speech itself. Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and readily than others; this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided.[20]

Just so. Leaders with a reputation for integrity are better able to shape people's perceptions of their interests and alternatives because they are respected, considered trustworthy, and perceived to possess the experience to make good judgments. They are also more persuasive when their approval is highly valued. Leaders who demand and reward excellence, and who spotlight and condemn inadequate performance, are likely to find their approval a rare and sought-after commodity. A leader who takes this too far might earn a reputation for never being satisfied, but a reputation for not being tough enough is probably more damaging.

A corollary is that challenges can motivate. "When all else fails, throw down a challenge," wrote Dale Carnegie in his famous work on persuasion.[21] The use of challenges should include suitable rewards for meeting objectives; friendly (nondivisive) competition might be employed as a catalyst.

Leaders also are viewed as more credible if their behavior is consistent with what they seek from others. Simply stated, this is the "walk-the-talk" principle. Leaders who are inconsistent or overtly self-serving give people psychological "wiggle room" to avoid making difficult choices, and thus render themselves unable to act as role models for the new cultures they seek to build.

## In Conclusion

Efforts to persuade are a pervasive part of life. Like negotiators, leaders not only need to know how to persuade; they must also know when to permit themselves to be persuaded and when to resist. The former means understanding your own biases and blind spots and how they might impede openness to good arguments. The latter calls for understanding the persuasive techniques of others and honing your defenses.

The approaches to persuasion presented here are as likely to be used *on* leaders as *by* leaders. People will strive to frame arguments, employ entanglement strategies, and exploit the power of reciprocity; they will seek to alter perceptions of alternatives and artificially constrain choices. Recognizing what is going on is the most potent defense: forewarned is forearmed. Beyond that, the best defenses are to *broaden options* and *defer commitment*. Slowing things down and thinking them through, although difficult, are usually the best bulwarks against making decisions you will come to regret.

The techniques of persuasion are inherently neither benign nor malign. Like many tools, they can be used for good or ill. Without them, leaders would be unable to lead.

# NOTES

**1.** Alderfer (1987) distinguished between organizational groups and identity groups in organizations. In his terms, groups are defined by: (1) boundaries, both physical and psychological, that determine who is and is not a group member; (2) power differences, i.e., differences in the types of resources groups can obtain and use; (3) affective patterns, the polarization of feeling among and between members of groups; and (4) cognitive formations, including distinct in-group languages. Identity groups are groups that individuals join at birth. People belong to organizational groups as a result of distinct choices on the part of the person and the organization. Examples of the former include ethnic and family groups. Examples of the latter include task groups and functions.

**2.** Lax and Sebenius (1991) proposed this distinction.

**3.** See Krackhardt and Hanson (1993). See also Chapter Six in Cialdini's (1993) work, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, which offers an excellent introduction to the psychology of interpersonal persuasion, exploring such key processes as consistency and commitment.

**4.** In their studies of the 1940 presidential election, Lazarfeld and his associates made the early observation that people were influenced both directly by information that they were exposed to and by people who either passed along the information or to whom they went for clues about "right thinking." The result was a "multi-step flow" model of opinion formation. See Lazarfeld, Bereson, and Gaudet (1948). See also Chapter Eight of Milburn (1991).

**5.** Kurt Lewin, a pioneer in the field of group dynamics, proposed a model of social change based on the idea of driving and restraining forces. One of Lewin's fundamental insights is that human collectives — including groups, organizations, and nations — are social systems that exist in a state of tension between forces pressing for change and forces resisting change: "[The behavior of a social system is] . . . the result of a multitude of forces. Some forces support each other, some oppose each other. Some are driving forces, others restraining forces. Like the velocity of a river, the actual conduct of a group depends upon the level. . . at which these conflicting forces reach an equilibrium." Lewin (1951: 173).

**6.** See Kahneman and Tversky (1995). For a good summary of "non-rational" biases in decision making see "Cognitive Limitations and Consumer Behavior," Chapter Eight in Frank (1994).

**7.** See "The Economics of Information and Choice Under Uncertainty" Chapter Six in Frank (1994).

**8.** For a discussion of anchoring see Chapter Four of Bazerman and Neale (1992).

**9.** See Chapter Eleven of Raiffa (1982).

**10.** See "Influencing Behavior," Chapter Two of Zimbardo and Leippe (1991).

**11.** See "Commitment and Consistency," Chapter Three of Cialdini (1993)

**12.** See "Reciprocity: The old give and take. . . and take," Chapter Two in Cialdini (1993)

**13.** See "Influencing Attitudes Through Behavior: When Doing Becomes Believing," Chapter Three in Zimbardo and Leippe (1991).

**14.** Lax and Sebenius (1991) termed these "patterns of deference."

**15.** Lax and Sebenius (1991) developed sequencing in the context of coalition building. See also Sebenius (1996: 58).

**16.** For an accessible summary of research on communication, see "Changing Attitudes Through Persuasion," Chapter Four of Zimbardo and Leippe (1991).

**17.** See Porter (1979).

**18.** For an introduction to TQ concepts and a comprehensive set of references see Ciampa (1991).

**19.** In the literature on propaganda, this is known as "source credibility." Jowett and O'Donnell (1992: 222) note that "Source credibility is one of the contributing factors that seems to influence change. People have a tendency to look up to authority figures for knowledge and direction. Expert opinion is effective in establishing the legitimacy of change and is tied to information control. Once a source is accepted on one issue another issue may be established as well on the basis of prior acceptance of the source."

**20.** *Rhetoric*, Book One, Chapter 2 from The *Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, edited by J. Barnes, Princeton University Press, 1984.

**21.** See the Dale Carnegie classic (1994 reiusse), *How to Win Friends and Influence People.*

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