INFLUENCE

# When Persuasion Isn't Persuasive:
## *Reaching Past the Salt*

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When a dish isn't working, adding more salt eventually ruins it. When persuasion falls flat, more reasons rarely help.

When I am cooking and something isn't quite working, the first thing I reach for is salt. If the flavor is still lacking, I may add a little more – but eventually I realize that the dish needs a bit of garlic or nutmeg or basil to achieve the result I want. If I just keep adding salt, eventually the dish will become inedible. The same can be true when it comes to our routine experience of getting others to take an action we would like them to take. Persuasion is the default behavior most of us learned to use when we want to get others to do something in addition to or different from what they are currently doing or planning to do. And sometimes it works very well – no additional "seasoning" needed. But it often seems to fall flat. We provide what we think should convince them, but the other person is unmoved, or they agree, but don't move forward with the desired action or show signs of changing their mind. Then we give them more reasons, as if more reasons will make up for whatever was lacking on our first try. We make the best logical case that we can, based on our own understanding, and, alas, we fail.

We may assume that the other person is too stubborn, too stupid, or too oppositional to see or accept our point of view. Or we may wonder why such an obvious case was not compelling. In fact, there are several possible explanations, including:

WHY PERSUASION FALLS FLAT

- The facts upon which it is based may be in dispute or open to different interpretations.
- There is another set of facts, leading to alternate conclusions, that are also relevant and more persuasive to them.
- The issue that prevents the other person from agreeing is based on needs or emotion rather than logic.
- The other person may have different interests (something to gain or to lose) from you.
- There is an unresolved conflict between the two of you that makes it difficult for the other person to respond in a positive way.
- The dynamics of the interchange may invite a "quid pro quo" response – the harder you push your ideas forward, the harder the receiver will push back.

- The desired action may be one that the other person is incapable of executing.

Persuasion usually involves offering reasons or referring to benefits. Offering reasons means explaining why you believe your preferred analysis or action is correct or needed. The reasons should be based on logic and objective data or examples from personal experience. They should be stated clearly and support your proposal. When reasons are strong and few in number rather than diluted with weaker ones, the recipient can focus on your best reasons. They should be understandable and meaningful to the other person. Reasons are best used when the other person sees you as an expert in the situation, does not feel competitive or in conflict with you, and when the data are perceived as objective and of value to them.

Referring to benefits means showing how your suggestion relates to goals, beliefs, values, interests, or aspirations the other holds dear. Instead of being based on logic, this is based on something you believe to be important and motivating to the other person. To use this strategy effectively, the goals and potential benefits you discuss should be understood and shared by the other person and seen as important and relevant to the situation. This behavior is most effective when you have a trusting relationship and you are engaging the other person to identify real benefits.

Even when you choose your words carefully, persuasion may be ineffective. Here are some alternatives:

- When the other person has a counterproposal, listen actively and genuinely consider their points. Maybe they have a better idea!
- When the other person seems confused or overwhelmed, take a break and think about an entirely different approach, possibly presenting your ideas to make them more simple, understandable, or interesting.
- When the other person is resisting or avoiding your "pitch," ask questions to learn about their concerns or issues, then listen actively to the response. Look for areas of alignment to build a new approach. Listen for values, emotions, and potential benefits, as well as positions.
- Empathize with their concerns if you can do so honestly and suggest ways to manage or eliminate them.
- Take the other person's perspective and consider what they might have to gain or to lose if they agree with you or accept your proposal. Consider offering a fair exchange, a modification, or another way to make it easier for them to agree.
- Describe a vision of success that is inviting and meaningful.
- Share your enthusiasm and positive regard for them to help reduce their opposition.
- If you learn of or sense that there is a skill deficit behind the reluctance, offer or suggest ways for them to learn more in a respectful way.
- Enlist a respected third party to help the two of you find a way forward.

In our program, Exercising Influence,[1] we frequently find that participants know or can easily learn how to use many of these approaches – yet, when it comes to influencing peers, direct reports, senior leaders, and even friends and family, they have fallen back on persuasion as a default. Sometimes this is cultural – they assume that persuasion is the professional or "right" way to influence colleagues. This is often the case in organizations where many employees have a technical background. They have learned the skills for and the value of making a sound, logical case to prove their points. They may have a narrow range of influence behaviors to choose from and even view other approaches as manipulative or

somehow unfair. Perhaps they have not observed many leaders in their own fields who were flexible in their approach, nor have they been exposed to learning experiences that introduce them to alternative ways to get to agreement.

When you intend to influence another person and persuasion isn't doing the job, consider using one of the approaches identified above. Once you develop greater flexibility, you may find yourself leading with another approach and using persuasion as needed and under the right conditions. Giving yourself more choices means you are more likely to succeed. While we would like to believe that "a good idea sells itself," it rarely does.

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NOTES

[1] Exercising Influence is a copyrighted program of Barnes & Conti Associates, Inc.

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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