

PERSUASION

The Art of Influencing People

THE WORLD'S BESTSELLING BOOK
ON PERSUASION BY **JAMES BORG**

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Introduction

The power of persuasion is maybe the ultimate source of advantage in life and work. It can be the critical separation factor between the successful and the rest. We all know people who are incredibly persuasive: Whatever the situation, somehow they always seem to be able to get others to agree with them, to go with their ideas, or to do what they want them to. With some people, it seems to be utterly effortless. Maybe they are so well versed in persuasive skills that it is effortless.

The good news for the rest of us is that persuasiveness can be learned and mastered.

In every area of your life, you've been involved with trying to move people—almost on a daily basis—to accept your point of view or request. It started early on as an infant, and as you grew older, all that changed was the magnitude of the tasks that you were faced with. My interest in the power of persuasion began very early in life when I became fascinated by the psychology of magic (especially mind reading) and was accepted as one of the youngest members of the Magic Circle. The Magic Circle is a prestigious society dedicated to the world of magic and illusion. Founded in 1905, the Circle has a total membership around 1,500 and members reside in 38 countries. For more information about the Magic Circle, visit their website at <http://themagiccircle.co.uk>.

Good magicians are masters of what are often loosely called “people skills.” When psychologists were studying the broad area of persuasion and noting how we are all practitioners of this art (every day of our lives), some of them came to an interesting conclusion: They felt that of all the “persuasive” tasks carried out by human beings, the magician’s task was the most difficult. Why? Because they had to “persuade” their audience (of one or many) to suspend their disbelief and believe that a miracle had taken place in front of their eyes (whether it was revealing a chosen playing card, witnessing the disappearance or production of an object, or beholding a mind-reading miracle).

They observed that, first of all, the magician would get and then control the audience’s attention (whether it was one person or hundreds). They would use the “right” words, listen carefully to any volunteers (giving due respect), and get them to remember the things they wanted them to remember (often through the “power of suggestion”). At the same time, they would work out what “type” of person they were dealing with, inject some humor into the proceedings (to induce relaxation), “read” the other person by observing their body

language, and ultimately get the audience to “trust” and feel favorably disposed toward them. All of which is designed to do one thing: persuade the audience to suspend their disbelief (and be entertained). A good demonstration of people/communication skills in action! But just like in everyday life, the most successful ones are those who deploy these skills effectively and have highly developed powers of persuasion.

It’s been said that life is like a game of cards. Voltaire said, “Each player must accept the cards life deals him or her; once they are in hand, he or she alone must decide how to play the cards in order to win the game.” In other words, the hand that is dealt you is deterministic; how you play it is down to free will. So being aware of the outcome you would like in any interaction is the first step toward achieving your goal.

In the many years I’ve spent in the business world, I’ve realized the huge advantage of being able to bring people along to our way of thinking. Every day, at work—and, of course, in your personal life—you come into contact with people who need to understand your point of view, either for you to help them or for them to help you. Equally, you need to understand their point of view. We need to persuade others to join our way of thinking and “read” how they are thinking.

In short, the power of persuasion is that little “magic formula” that we wish we could get our hands on to make life smoother for us. We could define it as this: any message that attempts to influence people’s opinions, attitudes, or actions.

If there is a magic formula, then the concoction is the application of all of these techniques and skills together. This will help you to take people from point A to point B, because persuasion is a *process*.

This book is the result of my own experiences over many successful years in advertising, sales, marketing, journalism, work psychology, and coaching—all underpinned by applied behavioral and social psychology research. Because these are all tried-and-tested techniques, my aim has been to simplify the process of persuasion by showing its application in real-world situations. The book shows you how to present yourself and your thoughts convincingly and how to “read” other people more effectively—and, in so doing, to allow you to be more persuasive and for people to trust and feel favorably disposed toward you.

It will make you more aware of your senses and help you to bring out the “sixth sense” that lies dormant within all of us. Leonardo da Vinci astutely observed that the average person “looks without seeing, listens without hearing, touches without feeling, eats without tasting, moves without physical awareness, inhales without awareness of odor or fragrance, and talks without thinking.” Does that sound like a fair assessment of most of the human race (or you!)? Certainly, if I had to pinpoint in a phrase what separates the master “persuaders” from the rest, it’s that they have an ability to understand what is going on in the other person’s head.

An important point that I can’t stress enough is that *persuasion* in this book, used in this way, is entirely positive. It works for your benefit—and for that of the people you are dealing with. You won’t have success every time, but by honing these skills and your own self-awareness, you’ll find that you increase your success rate significantly and forge better relationships. More and more research confirms that, in both our working and personal lives, it is persuasive skills that separate those who succeed from those who are less successful.

As my economics professor used to say, quoting J. K. Galbraith: “The world divides into just two types: Those of us who don’t know. And those of us who don’t know that we don’t know.”

This book is for both!

—James Borg

Chapter 2

“We lived for days on nothing but food and water.”

—W. C. Fields

Being a Good Listener:

Why Listening Is So Crucial

Of all the aspects of communication, listening is the most important. Now, that might not sound like good news—most of us prefer talking to listening, after all. Comments such as “She’s a good listener” are often made about people who don’t have much to say for themselves.

Stop and think about it, though.

Think about somebody you know who isn’t a good listener—who, in fact, never seems to listen to anything you say. Frustrating, isn’t it? And how does it make you feel about that person? Chances are, that person will have a hard time persuading you because you’re too busy feeling annoyed that he or she never listens.

Powerful persuasion begins with the ability to hear what others are saying. And listening is about far more than being quiet when somebody else speaks. In divorce courts and in the workplace, poor listening often is credited for any breakdown. Effective listening, on the other hand, creates and improves personal and business relationships. In every situation in life, effective listening helps you understand another person’s thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Being a Good Listener

When people are accused of being poor listeners, it’s usually done behind their backs. They then remain unaware of this major failing, which can lose them friends, work colleagues, and business clients.

So how do you rate as a listener? Being a bad one is a very serious sin of which most people are guilty. They only *think* they listen. In many cases, the compulsion to speak devalues the function of listening.

Fact is, most people prefer talking to listening (and, unfortunately, they usually exercise this preference). To be persuasive, mastering the art of listening (as opposed to hearing, which we discuss later) is critical to success.

Active listening is difficult. It requires a lot of concentration. You have to be alert. But active listening is fundamental to learning and, thus, must be mastered. The sad thing is, schools don't teach the importance of listening skills. Even today, schools place more emphasis on trigonometry than on listening.

A much-cited study by Paul Rankin on how much time people spend in various types of communication showed interesting results. Consider how much the average person did the following in a typical day:

Listened: 45% of the time

Spoke: 30%

Read: 16%

Wrote: 9%

In our working life, listening is highly prized as a desirable interpersonal skill. People are impressed with good listening in others, even though they might not feel that they should make the effort themselves. A large computer company decided to train its employees in listening and sent them on courses throughout the United States. Employee feedback indicated that, in addition to helping them in their working arena, listening was instrumental in dramatically improving their relationships at home.

You often hear of somebody talking too much, but nobody can be accused of listening too much. ("Gosh, I just couldn't stop that person from listening—made me miss my plane....") It's surprising what people will tell you if you're a good listener. Think how it works on a social level among friends and acquaintances. What were you like the last time you bumped into your neighbor in the street or when you were having dinner with friends? Families constantly point to listening problems at home. Beleaguered parents say that the children don't listen, and children are

exasperated because their parents don't listen to them. Listening is a sign of affirmation, so it promotes self-esteem; the opposite usually occurs if a breakdown occurs.

In business, it's no different. People are drawn to good listeners. Being able to talk to somebody outside the company's internal politics who listens objectively can be appealing. Someone who feels bogged down by the red tape of his own position may relish the therapeutic satisfaction of sounding off to an outsider.

This little rhyme speaks volumes:

**His thoughts were slow, His words were few,
And never made to glisten, But he was a joy
Wherever he went.
You should have heard him listen.**

Listening can pay good dividends. It can establish you as a “friend,” and that makes for more mutual understanding in a business relationship.

Besides, if you listen carefully, you pick up all sorts of information about the idiosyncrasies of an organization—and the individual you're dealing with. People who are poor listeners often see listening as a passive—and, therefore, unproductive—activity. Their ego gets in the way. They feel that they need to be talking to make any impact on the other person.

Observe people in internal meetings in the workplace and in sales situations, and you'll see the talk-talk-talk syndrome with a vengeance. Some people continually interrupt with superfluous remarks because they believe that they're contributing. When they butt in, though, they miss important points. And they ask questions to which they already know the answers. But they're communicating, they feel, because they're talking. How wrong they are! Attentive listening is also part of communication.

Talking long and loud doesn't always equate with having personality; it is often a substitute for it.

Running “Tapes” in Your Own Head

You can listen productively in only one way: Try to remove all distractions from your mind, so you can concentrate on the speaker. Of course, that's easier said than done! Such distractions come

from your thoughts, senses, and emotions—“tapes” in your own head. Preoccupation or lack of interest impedes effective listening (see Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1 *Running “Tapes” in your own head.*

If you’re not interested in what the speaker has to offer, you’ll have an aversion to listening. Preoccupation with something can be a barrier, too. For example, if someone has just bumped into the back of your car, the nuisance of it keeps coming back to you.

The environment can also influence how well we listen. Have you ever tried to have a meaningful discussion with somebody when a TV set is blaring in the background? Your requests to turn it off because you want to discuss something might meet with a reply such as, “It’s okay, I can listen even if it’s on.” You might

achieve a compromise with the other person, agreeing to turn off the sound and leave only the picture on. It doesn't work. You're still distracted by the visual "noise," even though you've eliminated the auditory interference. Noise can come from all sources. It's difficult to concentrate in a meeting if street repair is going on outside. Similarly, you could be in a seminar and miss the first 20 minutes of what is said because you're absorbed in a beautiful oil painting hung over the fireplace (visual noise, again).

I often use what I call the "W. C. Fields test" if I want to test somebody's listening skills. Consider his old quip: "We lived for days on nothing but food and water." In conversation, if I sense that somebody isn't listening, I'll throw in a statement relating to a fictitious scenario. The responses are often quite amusing, ranging from "Oh, how awful" and "How on earth did you manage?" to "That's terrible!" and "Oh, really?" and "What happened?" Other people actually "listen" and respond with a smile or laugh as the words sink in. Try it. You'll find it interesting (and amusing).

So who are you trying to kid when you claim to be a good listener? Listening isn't merely saying nothing while the other person is talking. It's deriving meaning from what someone else says. And that's what people find difficult—they think listening is just hearing.

I Hear What You Say

A lot of confusion and discord is perpetrated in our daily lives because of a lack of distinction between hearing and listening. Okay. You may have always assumed that the two terms are interchangeable. (I hear what you say!) But the two terms actually are entirely different.

Hearing is a sensory activity, a physiological process in which our auditory connections transmit information to the brain—through our ears, of course.

Listening involves a different process, of interpreting and understanding. It derives meaning from what has been heard—it's a psychological process.

We've all probably been guilty of not listening to what was said and then meekly repeated the words verbatim (while being amazed and relieved that we didn't flub our lines).

Her: "Look, you've got to get the car tuned up in the next few days. We've got that long drive down to mom's on Christmas Day."

Him: [Absorbed in a playoff football game on television]

Her: "You didn't listen to a word I said, did you?"

Him: "What? Yeah, of course I did. We've got to get the car tuned up in the next few days because of the long drive down to your mom's on Christmas Day. Okay, I'll get it tuned up as soon as Christmas is over."

Getting the lines right (hearing) doesn't look as though it will work in this instance! Effective listening is really a combination of the two activities, which results in deriving meaning and understanding from the speaker's words. Listening isn't easy. It's truly a skill.

We Think Much Faster Than We Can Speak

We all have to contend with a major obstacle to effective listening: We can think much faster than anyone can speak. Tests have shown the following:

- We talk at between 120 and 150 words per minute.
- We think at a rate of 600 to 800 words per minute.

We can think at approximately four to five times the rate that somebody is speaking, so we tend to think of other things than just what is being said (see Figure 2.2).

Of course, the figures vary, but the fundamental point is that the listener is always ahead of the person doing the talking. The implications of this are evident. When you're listening to people, the radio, the television, or whatever, your mind has time to wander away from the words being spoken. You lose concentration. And if you start thinking about something and it takes you over, you'll blot out the other noise and thus switch off. You might look as though you're listening, but you're not actually hearing anything.



Figure 2.2 *We think much faster than we can speak.*

Since all communication between individuals essentially moves the relationship forward or backward, or keeps it the same, the way you listen and respond to other people is paramount in promoting the relationship. If you listen empathically, you're giving out the signal of "I'm interested in everything that you're saying and I'm eager to understand your point of view." If you fail to listen and respond in the right way, you're saying the opposite.

So how do we get the best out of the speaker by showing that we're listening in the right way?

Don't Interrupt

Thoughts formulate faster than speech, so there's a strong temptation to interrupt the other person. Interrupting is a sign that you're not listening, that you're eager to sidetrack the speaker's line of reasoning (in favor of your own), or that you're someone who enjoys talking more than listening. Whatever the reason, you can antagonize the other person by interrupting. This other

person will be less likely to listen intently to you (when it's his or her turn to do the listening) if you interrupt midstream. The spontaneity is gone once you've interrupted. Consider this example:

First neighbor to second neighbor: "You know, I've been thinking about the problem of your new extension blocking the light from our bedroom. I know the council has approved it and you've got planning permission. I don't want us to fall out...."

Second neighbor (interrupting): "Look, it's okay. I've been to see the architect and I've told him to reduce the height. It's sorted out. Sarah didn't want any bad feelings. Neither did I."

First neighbor: "But I meant...."

Second neighbor: "It's fine, honestly. Don't think any more about it. I've got to run—I'll get stuck in the traffic on the freeway. Bye."

Well, if the second neighbor had listened without interrupting, events would have taken a different course. His neighbor was going to say, "We're having a loft conversion done—been toying with the idea for years. Sue suggested we make that our new bedroom because it's much bigger and faces south, so your extension won't be a problem for us."

Take a moment to think how you feel the next time someone interrupts you during a conversation. Did it please you? Were you annoyed? Were the other person's sentences better than yours?

Don't Finish Someone Else's Sentences

As we saw in the previous example, one person's interjection turned out to be detrimental to his cause—he'd have been much better off if he had kept quiet and let his neighbor finish.

Another irritating habit, if done repeatedly, is to finish the speaker's sentences. Consider the following:

Client: "So this time I want to avoid any...."

Designer (interrupting): "Further catastrophe?"

Client: "Er, yes. That's right."

Designer: "Don't worry. We'll pull out all the stops."

You can do this occasionally, but don't make a habit of it. To keep doing it to the same person is not only irritating, but also bad psychology, because the speaker won't feel in control of his or her own ideas.

Filling in words for somebody now and then can show that you are actually listening and provide feedback that you're attentive, but it can also get in the way of the other person's ego. It may well look as though you're trying to wrestle original thoughts from them and claim them for your own. That renders you suspect and doesn't achieve the rapport you're aiming to establish.

Jumping the gun like this has another drawback, too: You might guess the wrong ending! Perhaps that possibility has never occurred to you simply because nobody has ever bothered to correct your mistake. Maybe the other person doesn't want to embarrass you and tell you that you're an idiot who has messed up his or her line of thought. They can't continue with their original point (and it might have been crucial).

The ending that you so kindly supplied (the wrong one) might also plant doubts that never previously existed. For example, consider this exchange:

Jeff (the client): "I'm happy to do business with you—it's been a couple of years now, I think, since we dealt with you—but I want to make sure...."

You (interrupting): "...that you don't get the wrong consignment like you did the last time and have to wait another three weeks."

Ouch!

Jeff was actually going to say, "I want to make sure that the purchase order form that we'll send you gives the different delivery locations for each batch."

The client now is alerted to the fact that your company messed up the delivery last time and caused a three-week delay. He may not have known anything about it or he may have forgotten. And you've just told him. Now he has doubts because late delivery could cost his company a lot of money and bad feeling

within the organization. Jeff decides to think about it: “I’ll get back to you.” He never does. You’ve lost his business because of a throw-away and ill-considered line. To make matters worse, your client was actually going to say something to your benefit.

Remember the old Mark Twain adage: “Better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool than to open it and remove all doubt!”

Talking over Another Person

Another bad habit many people adopt is talking over the other person while they’re speaking. You may think of members of your family, friends, or coworkers who are guilty of this. Your boss may do it to you all the time. It’s very common. And it’s very irritating. When you’re on the receiving end, this irritating habit says, “I don’t care what you’re going to say—my story is better than yours!” (Remind you of the school playground?) For example, consider this:

Anne: “Did you enjoy the cruise, Charlotte? How was it?”

Charlotte: “Oh, I can’t tell you how much we enjoyed ourselves. They had food on each deck at almost all hours, day and night....” (What she says next is completely drowned out by the other person.) “...and then there were midnight buffets, and, unfortunately, we got a touch of food poisoning on....”

Anne (talking over her): “Oh, how wonderful. We went on a fabulous cruise. Now, when would that have been? Oh, I know, it must have been ten—no, more like eight and a half years....”

Do you recognize this tendency of one-upping in yourself? Or do you recognize it in other people? We all talk over others, to some extent, for various reasons not evident at the time, such as excitement, a desire to show empathy, or a desire to “bring someone down” (if they’re obnoxious). If we’re aware of it, we can at least try to avoid doing it. Talking over someone can lose you friends or business.

The message is clear: Whether you’re doing the listening or whether you want somebody to listen effectively to what you say, try to avoid or prevent any barriers to productive listening.

Offering Advice Too Soon

This is often a problem when you're eager to help someone, whether it be a friend, a colleague, or somebody in a business situation. You want to offer support and help, so you jump into the conversation quickly. The result is an abrupt and premature end to the two-way conversation. If you're the classic problem-solving type, you may be guilty of this, or maybe you are the type that oozes empathy; you might do this frequently, from a desire to help.

Your friend: "That's twice he has telephoned at the last minute, saying he has to work late. I'm concerned: The thought crossed my mind that he might be seeing someone else. I don't know whether I'm just being silly...."

You: "Ditch him. He's not worth it."

Your business client: "You see, our problem is that the staff members just don't stay. Maybe after four to six months, they.... I don't know whether it's the attitude of our senior people toward them or, I don't know, there could be a few other reasons...."

You: "Don't worry. We vet all applicants thoroughly. Our company has been around for ten years now. I'm sure we can get some stability for you."

The problem in both of these examples is that the quick response has blocked any further lines of inquiry. Although they hadn't finished, the speakers were cut off, and now the conversation is being guided in the listener's direction. The speakers had more to get off their chest but were cut off.

Psychologists operating in the field of therapy are coming to realize that, all too often, clients aren't heard because therapists are doing therapy *to* them instead of *with* them. Instead of listening to what clients were saying and becoming immersed in their conversations, they tend to make up meanings about what they said. Conversational questions arise from a position of not knowing. They involve responsive and active listening; they don't come from a therapist's preconceived theories.

Paraphrasing

Listening empathetically is the key to advancing interpersonal relationships. The technique of paraphrasing is very powerful because it lets the speaker see the ideas (and feelings) he or she has conveyed from the other person's point of view. When you paraphrase, you are not adding to the message; you are sending back the meaning you received. The listener is effectively telling the speaker, using his or her own words, what he or she has interpreted from what the speaker has said. Paraphrasing is invaluable for these reasons:

- The sender is reassured that the listener is trying to understand the basis of his or her thoughts and feelings, and appreciates being heard.

“Let me just clarify what you’re saying. You’re a bit concerned about a stranger having your apartment keys, and that’s the main reason.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“It looks as though you’re saying that you’ll place your television advertising budget with us as long as there’s no conflict of interest with another client.”

“That’s correct.”
- The listener might want to ensure that the sender hears what he or she has just said (this could be for a positive or a negative reason) because this will give the speaker a clearer perspective of the implications of his or her current line of thinking.

“It looks as though you’re saying that you want to give up the classes altogether. You realize that if you change your mind later, you’ll have to start from scratch again. Is that what you want?”

“Well...no, I suppose not.”

“Can I just clarify what I think you’re saying? You’d like your IT managers to try out the system piece-meal. It would end up costing you four times as much this way. Would that be acceptable to the departmental managers?”

“Mmm...that’s something to consider.”

- The listener may have found it difficult to gauge the other person's true feelings and needs to attain an accurate understanding of what has been said.

"I'd just like to ask you if I've understood this correctly. You want to change departments because the gossiping interferes with your work, is that it?"

"Well, there are other things."

"Can I just be sure of this in my own mind? The fact that he doesn't ever ask how you are makes you feel this way?"

"No. That's just a small part of it—it's the tip of the iceberg."

It's a fact of life that, in deciding whether to go along with our way of thinking, people use their own line of reasoning instead of ours. Sometimes they don't even know what their line of reasoning is, so we need to use some empathetic questioning to dig deep and read minds. A lot of this might be based on emotions. Therefore, your natural empathy has to spring into action. We need to listen for the deep meanings in any communication.

We have a much better chance of influencing somebody if we can get to the bottom of the other person's reasoning and make an educated guess about his or her way of thinking.

We cannot overemphasize the importance of listening in family life, work situations, and friendships. Listening pays enormous dividends. One of the traits of persuasive or charismatic people is their ability to not only feel, but also look fascinated by what somebody else is saying to them. Most of our life is spent listening. Of course, we want people to listen to us, too, so our questions are important; so is getting and holding attention.

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