



Persuasive Leadership **by Melanie Billings-Yun**

Persuasion--the art of winning someone over--is a critical skill for every lawyer. However, it can be confusing for the practitioner, as the nature of persuasion changes almost completely depending on whether it's exercised in the courtroom or the boardroom. In the courtroom, your objective is to prove the superiority of your position over your opponent's in order to convince a neutral third party to pass judgment in your favor. In the boardroom your goal is not to win an argument, but to **influence** others to make decisions or take actions that will directly affect themselves and their stakeholders.

Confuse the two at your peril. For example, people are rarely influenced by being told that their concerns, ideas or opinions are wrong or not as valid as your own. They react even worse if they feel that you aren't giving them a fair hearing, but are merely marking time until you can get in your rebuttal. In other words, the techniques of persuasion in an adversarial system become detrimental to your success on a board or committee, when your role is that of a partner in the process.

So what should you be doing? Persuasive leadership requires that you focus the conversation away what you think is right and toward the interests of the other parties. Second, it obliges you to adopt a more constructive way of speaking than comes naturally in a dispute. Third, despite the generally held view that convincing others means "talking them into it," effective persuasion balances speaking, questioning, and listening. Most fundamentally, it entails creating an atmosphere that leads others to want to listen to and cooperate with you.

Psychologist Robert Cialdini, who has spent a career studying the science of persuasion, has set forth a number of fundamental aspects of persuasiveness, none of which include winning an argument. They do include: 1) being liked; 2) exercising reciprocity; 3) working toward common goals; 4) being positive; and 5) displaying (or calling upon) genuine expertise, not just venting strong opinions.

If you want others to take ownership of a decision, you need to involve them in the decision-making process. You don't always have to be in charge. Instead of saying, "Let's meet next week at 10:00," try asking "When would be a good time for you to meet next week?" Instead of saying, "Here's what I think we should do," try asking, "What if we did this?" If others say an idea wouldn't work, don't insist it will. Ask them what their concerns are, then go through those concerns one by one seeing how you can allay them. If you don't have the expertise in a certain area, be willing to call on others or canvas the group to draw out those who do. You will achieve better solutions and more buy-in than if you rely only on the loudest voices.

Even in disputes, you need to make it clear to others that you don't dislike them personally, that you respect their right to hold their own point of view, and that you share the same overarching goal of ensuring the health of the organization. Though you may disagree on how best to resolve a problem and move forward, you will stand a far greater chance of reaching a favorable resolution if you always give others the benefit of the "3 A's":

Admiration--treating them and speaking of their group with respect, as opposed to putting them down or taking a superior tone;

Affiliation--approaching them as business partners with whom you want to work cooperatively as opposed to enemies or malefactors;

Acknowledgment--appreciating the merit of their thoughts, feelings, and actions (or at least their right to have them), as opposed to dismissing or demeaning them.

Remember, the effective leader seeks both to reach a mutual agreement now and to work together productively tomorrow. In wielding influence over others, respect, open-mindedness, empathy, constructiveness, and sharing credit are far more powerful forces than are good debating skills.

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