

Strategic Persuasive Communication: An Emerging Trend in Contemporary Corporate Sector

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ABSTRACT

Persuasion forms a major portion of the daily communicative activities of a manager in a business organization. It is not the act of coaxing or encouraging individuals to accept or do something that they do not want to. It demands understanding of the concerns, positions and objectives of the audience and is the process of finding meaningful benefits and creative solutions, keeping in view the needs of the audience. It is a powerful art form that the managers need to master. Persuasion is a vast science based on a very strong theoretical framework. It is essentially required that the students of business management who aspire to become future managers should be exposed to the theories and techniques of persuasion. The paper attempts to study the relevance of persuasion for managerial success and the different strategies of persuasion that can be used to achieve persuasive goals.

Keywords : Persuasion, Techniques, Theories, Compliance, Managerial Communication

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'communication' has been defined and used variously in the literature of communication science. It seems that it is reduced to mean the process by which meanings are exchanged between people through a common set of symbols. Etymologically the word originates from the Latin *communicare*, which means to impart, to participate, to share or to make common. In the process of communication two or more persons participate through a medium that carries the information or message for a particular purpose mutually understood by both the sender and the receiver.

Communication performs a variety of functions in different settings. Communication becomes all the more essential when we talk of business. In the world of business the role of communication is to (i) establish and disseminate goals of the business organisation, (ii) develop plans for their achievement, (iii) organise human and other resources in the most effective and efficient way, (iv) select, develop and appraise the members, (v) lead, direct, motivate and create a climate in which people want to contribute, and (vi) control performance.

The communicative activities in a business organisation fall broadly into three categories, viz. internal-operational communication, external-operational communication and personal communication. While the first two types of communication focus on raising the operational efficiency of the organization by internal and external interactions, the third type focuses on interpersonal communication amongst the employees of the

organisation. Irrespective of the category of communication, persuasion forms a major portion of an organisation's daily communication activities.

Persuasion is a process of communication in which a communicator voluntarily forms, sustains, reinforces or changes the attitudes or behavior of the recipient in accordance with what the communicator intends by his or her message (Steinberg, 1999). Communication in the business world is hardly bereft of persuasion because business, for its success, requires the recipient of the communication process to be persuaded and to agree to the communicator's proposals. An early Harvard Business School study, on what it takes to achieve success and be promoted in an organization, says that the individual who gets ahead in business is the person who is able to communicate, to make sound decisions, and to persuade others to get things done. (Bowman, 1964). Particularly in the present age, when erosion of traditional hierarchy is significantly visible with command and control culture steadily declining, persuasion has become all the more important.

In a survey among executives of 500 companies from all over the US on the importance of persuasive communication skills, Bennet and Olney(1975) have found that the general consensus of the executives is that mastering persuasive communication skills is the most important criterion for business success because it is found that persuasion forms the most important component of a business professional's daily communicative activities. A similar survey carried out by Rainey(1975) to generate opinions about college training in Business Communication reveals that a majority of academicians and corporate executives feel the most crucial communication ability in business and industry is to write and speak persuasively.

A lot of research has also been carried out on persuasion as a necessary art for managers and leaders. Conger (1998) talks of persuasion as an art form that requires commitment and practice, especially as today's business contingencies make persuasion more necessary than ever. Persuasion can pull people together, move ideas forward, galvanise change and forge constructive solutions. But to do all that, people must understand persuasion for what it really is - not convincing and selling, but learning and negotiating.

Persuasion is generally believed to be art that some fortunate people are gifted with. However, it can always be learnt and mastered. The present paper attempts to study the relevance of persuasion for managerial success and the strategies of persuasion that business professionals need to learn to achieve their persuasive goals.

II. DISCUSSION

Persuasion is used in all major communicative activities of a business organisation ranging from routine requests, apologies and presentations to advertisements and negotiations. By far the most common kind of persuasive document one will write is a letter or an e-mail that makes a routine request of a team member or a customer. Irrespective of the receiver, the tone and style of writing should be such that the sender's persuasive goal is achieved. A business professional will also need to write feasibility reports that will present his projects formally. A feasibility report contains two parts: the first part gives the details about the project, and the second urges the project's adoption by outlining its benefits. It is this second part that demands efficient persuasive skills. Apologies are equally persuasive in nature as these can breach business relationships and can also maintain future business relations.

A business professional will often face the need to write sales and marketing letters where persuasion plays a crucial role. In these the writer communicates with an abstract, unfamiliar audience. These letters are intended to solve problems, focus on the recipient's problems and offer an immediate solution. So the writing should be such that it builds the trust of the reader and persuades to act accordingly.

Presentations are usually persuasive. When a professional makes a presentation before his superiors or co-workers his motive is, most often, to present his ideas about a project. He tries his best to persuade the audience to appreciate and accept his ideas. No organisation can survive without advertising. Advertisement can be defined as a communication process, a marketing process or a public relation process. But it is above all a persuasion process. It intends to draw the attention of the customer, generate his interest in the product or service, create a desire to purchase it and provide a call to action. Every step of it demands tactful persuasion. Persuasion is probably most visible in case of negotiations. The two parties involved in a negotiation process try their level best to persuade each other about the benefits of their own proposal so that the opposite party agrees to their terms and conditions and act accordingly. Negotiation, in fact, is all about persuasion.

If a business professional has to be successful in the contemporary business world and accomplish his desired objectives, mastering persuasive communication skills is an essential pre-requisite for him.

The process of persuasion can be effectively carried out with some well defined strategies and techniques. Some basic steps of persuasion have been discussed:

a. Analysing the purpose : The first step in a persuasion process is to analyse the purpose of persuasion. The speaker needs to explore his purpose and relate it to the receiver's perspective and since the persuader expects the receiver to do something new or different, he should be absolutely sure that his purpose is clear.

b. Analysing the audience : For any kind of message, audience analysis is quite important. But the process can become much more involved for persuasive messages. It becomes pertinent for the persuader to appeal to the specific needs of the audience. The best persuasive messages are closely connected to the audience's desires and interests.

c. Framing argument : In order to effectively persuade the audience, the persuader needs to frame his argument in the most effective way.

d. Balancing emotional and logical appeal : Most persuasive messages include both emotional and logical appeals but what is important is to find the right balance between the two types of appeals. Usually when one is persuading someone to accept a complex idea, to take a serious step or to make a tough decision, he needs to harp on logical appeal and make his emotional appeal slightly subtle. On the other hand, if he is persuading someone to purchase a product, join a cause or make a donation, such things that do not need a lot of thinking, he will rely a bit more on emotion.

e. Reinforcing position : Once the arguments are framed and the appeal chosen, one needs to concentrate on strengthening the message with some important persuasive tools. Effective persuaders believe that facts alone may not be enough to persuade the audience. The numerical data are to be supplemented with examples, stories, metaphors and analogies. Proper use of language helps to reinforce the persuader's position. However, skillful use of semantics is not the only persuasive tool. There are some additional techniques to strengthen the

persuasive message. The source needs to be moderate, focus on the goal, and anticipate opposition and provide sufficient support.

f. Dealing with resistance : The best way to deal with audience resistance is to eliminate it. If the audience is biased against the idea from the beginning, then it is always wise to present all sides and all options, explaining the pros and cons of each. Anticipating and answering the possible objections and turning those into opportunities will definitely help the speaker.

Most persuasive messages follow an organizational plan. It is called the AIDA plan. This approach works in four phases.

a. Attention: The persuader has to make the audience hear his idea. He has to begin the message with an attention getting statement that is personalized, straightforward, relevant and most importantly of real interest or value to the audience.

b. Interest: In this section, the speaker tries to build the reader's interest by explaining the relevance of the message. He continues the opening theme and paints a detailed picture with words.

c. Desire: The speaker tries to build the desire of the reader by showing how the offer can really help him. He tries to reduce resistance by thinking up and answering in advance any questions the audience might have. He tries to provide evidence to prove his claim in order to increase audience willingness to take the action.

d. Action: In this phase, the speaker gives a strong and simple call to action, restating how the audience will benefit by it. The secret of a successful action plan is making the action easy.

In order to make the AIDA plan successful, it is necessary for the speaker to narrow his objectives and focus on the primary goal.

In interpersonal persuasion, one of the most widely studied aspects is compliance gaining. It is the use of persuasive strategies to induce behaviour in the receiver. Marwell and Schmitt (1967) categorized such strategies five different headings :

a. Rewarding strategy – The persuader who uses a rewarding strategy attempts to manipulate the receiver's environment in a positive manner. He either promises a reward or is friendly to the receiver so that he or she complies.

b. Punishing strategy – In this case the persuader seeks to negatively alter the receiver's environment. The persuader usually threatens to punish the receiver if he does not comply.

c. Expertise strategy – The persuader who uses this strategy tries to convince the receiver that if he complies, good things will happen to him, if he does not he will face problems.

d. Activation of internalized commitments – In this case the persuader tries to make moral appeal to the receiver or raise positive or negative self- feelings. This strategy is particularly effective because it makes the receiver think about internalized norms, or their ideas about what they ought to do in a particular situation. This strategy focuses on how individuals feel about themselves.

e. Activation of interpersonal commitments – In the final strategy the persuader either tries to call in a past favour in exchange for current compliance or tells the receiver that others will think poorly of him if he does not comply. This strategy is based on the receiver's identification with some reference group.

Besides these, there are many other techniques and strategies of persuasion that can be used by business professionals in an organization to achieve persuasive goals. In fact, strategies of persuasive communication should be taught to the students of Business Management as they are the future professionals who will, day in and day, face challenges to persuade.

The relation between theory and practice is very important, as without theoretical knowledge, it is impossible to use the skills in practice. Knowledge of the techniques and strategies of persuasion gives a better understanding and allows viewing the problems from different perspectives. It serves to provide a rationale for decision-making. Moreover, an explicit awareness of the theoretical framework enhances managerial activity.

III. CONCLUSION

Persuasion pervades almost all forms of the communicative activities of a business organization. In the contemporary corporate world, it is an essential requisite that the business professionals are equipped with strategic persuasive communication skills. Though it is believed that persuasion is an art that few people are gifted with, yet it can be mastered with the help of a sound knowledge of its techniques and strategies.

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