

How to Change Someone's Mind

I was recently chatting with a group of people when the dialogue drifted to the question of what could be done about the problems in our society. One woman observed that solutions can't come through force, but rather by "changing how people think." I believe she's right.

After all, political and cultural wars are won by winning people over to certain ideas. Obvious though it may sound, if the majority of people in our country believed the right things, our problems would be quickly solved. Arguably, then, our battle is less about winning a particular election, funding a particular effort, or establishing a particular law—although those things are important too—than it is about winning the war for minds. No lasting change can come from any individual political victory so long as the population is fed on falsehood.

How, then, do we change someone's mind? And are there certain types of argumentation that have a proven track-record of changing minds and hearts? A [2016 study](#) by current University of Chicago professor Chenhao Tan provides some practical answers.

Tan and his co-researchers looked at two years of online discussions in the Reddit forum ChangeMyView (CMV), where users post an argument and invite people to reason against it with a full line of reasoning, unlike the debates that often unfold on Facebook and Twitter. Granted, users of CMV are clearly inviting dialogue, so they are already open to persuasion more than the average person. Most posters don't change their original opinion due to the responses they receive, but those that do post a delta symbol.

Here's what the study found:

- We naturally tend to side with the majority. If we find

that we are in a camp all by ourselves, we're more likely to question our position. The study confirmed when it found that the number of challengers to the original poster's position increased the likelihood that the original poster would change his mind.

- Original posters were more likely to be persuaded by challengers who offered multiple replies—but only up to a certain point. This indicates that real persuasion takes some effort, persistence, and time, but that it's also important to know when further attempts will be fruitless. After three or four unsuccessful attempts, it's unlikely you'll win someone over.
- The more persuasive arguments had little overlap with the original post in terms of word choice, the study found. In other words, responses that brought in different language and new perspectives compared to the original poster's argument had more success.
- Longer, more detailed arguments were more persuasive. No mystery here. One-liners rarely do anything other than stir up further resistance.
- Arguments with calmer language were more persuasive. Unless you're appealing to an audience already in your favor, inflammatory language will probably convince no one, just cause more pushback.
- Arguments that cited outside information using links proved more successful, as did those that used examples.
- Arguments that used hedging—such as, “It could be the case that...”—were more likely to persuade.
- Arguments that used more personal pronouns were more influential. This might be because personal connection and emotion play a big role in persuasion.
- Arguments that quoted the original poster were *not*

persuasive. This may be because the original poster could become defensive if they felt that their words were being used against them. We know from [other studies](#) that people can respond with strong negative emotion when faced with evidence contrary to their beliefs, especially if those beliefs are integral to their identity. Anything perceived as threatening or critical will only heighten this response.

Regarding the last point, emotion cannot be ignored in argumentation. Oftentimes, our emotional desire to appear consistent and loyal to our group identity can override what our reason tells us is true. Emotion often breeds irrational responses, particularly if we feel threatened in our core values (which often include political ones), so the would-be persuader must be careful not to trigger a negative emotional response. On this issue, [Anatol Rapoport's rules about criticizing someone](#), articulated by Daniel Dennett, provide a helpful tool:

1. You should attempt to re-express your target's position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your target says, "Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way."
2. You should list any points of agreement (especially if they are not matters of general or widespread agreement).
3. You should mention anything you have learned from your target.
4. Only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism.

Of course, I've only scratched the surface of the science and art of persuasion here. In addition to acknowledging the insights of modern science, we would do well to return to a serious exploration of the classical writings on rhetoric, starting with Aristotle.

We spend much of our time and effort on social media slogging

and traditional political campaigning. These have their place. But how much of our efforts at persuasion prove effective? How often are we operating in an echo chamber and not reaching new listeners anyway—or even alienating them? If we truly want to change minds, then perhaps it's not enough to simply promote good ideas—we also have to teach people to effectively spread those ideas by being true rhetoricians and persuasive purveyors of truth.

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