

Ethical Persuasion

Phase I: Exploring the Other Person's Viewpoint

Author: Tom Rusk, M.D. with D. Patrick Miller

Communication is, at its most basic level, the sharing of a message from one person or group to another person or group. *Successful* communication is much more than that. Add components of stressful conditions, time pressures, gender differences, and imbalances in power between the parties, and achieving success in communicating may seem less likely than winning *PowerBall*.

Consider: A serious issue has arisen between you and a colleague. You have already thought of a dozen elements supporting your position. Clearly, your colleague has erred and she simply doesn't "get it." You're sure that all you need to do is explain the problem to your colleague, as you see it, and she will have no alternative but to agree with you. You're sure, you think.

Back up. What would happen if, before you start explaining everything, you first listen? Why, you ask, should *you* listen first, when it's obvious to you that your colleague has overstepped her professional bounds?

Tom Rusk, author of *The Power of Ethical Persuasion* lists four advantages to listening first (p. 68-70):

1. *Learn from the other person's presentation of personal thoughts and feelings.* Are you 100 percent certain that you have all the facts? Might you not save yourself some embarrassment, as well as unnecessary arguing, if new information were to be disclosed that could alter your position? Even if no new information were to be revealed, you still know both sides of the issue before you present your case.
2. *Earn the leverage of fairness.* Your willingness to listen patiently to the other person will earn you the right to fully express yourself later. You will likely observe that your patient listening and genuine interest in understanding the other person's perspective will be similarly reciprocated.
3. *Defuse the negative effects of another person's pent-up feelings.* By listening first, you are demonstrating your respect for the intensity of feeling or urgency of need the other person is expressing. Further, you are showing that your relationship with the other person is more important to you than the identified issue. Your silent gesture will allow the other person to calm down and, later, be willing to give you a fair hearing. Absent the pent-up feelings, give-and-take discussion can continue on a more reasoned basis.
4. *Cultivate your patience, openness, and objectivity under stress.* By patiently listening first, you will enhance your own personal-growth process, resulting in higher levels of self-respect. Essentially, you are cultivating behaviors that demonstrate maturity and comfort under conditions that may be anything but comfortable. No one said this is easy! The watchword is *courage*.

Before describing the seven steps of Phase I of Ethical Persuasion, it will be helpful to be clear on the goal: to convince the other person that you thoroughly understand his or her point of view and position. Now, let's look at the seven steps (p. 70-81):

1. *Establish that your immediate goal is mutual understanding, not problem solving.* By seeking first to understand the other person, the quality and value of the relationship becomes the focus. It also helps reduce the stress and competitiveness that may have developed when only the issue and the positions of the dispute were emphasized. The following statements can open the way to mutual understanding:
 - "Before we try to solve the problem, let's be sure we understand each other."
 - "I need to step back from the problem and try to understand your feelings."
 - "First, let's agree to understand each other. Then, we can figure out what to do."
 - "Can we first take a little time to share our feelings with each other?"
2. *Elicit the other person's thoughts, feelings, and desires about the subject at hand.* (This may overlap with Step 1.) The three key elements in this step are clearly identifying the issue, stating your degree of

concern, and requesting that the other person speak to the issue and his or her feelings about it. You can do that with statements such as these:

- “I’m struggling with a problem, and I could really use your help.”
- “I’m upset about what just happened in our departmental meeting. Could you shed some light on how that decision was made?”
- “You seem to be upset with me. Have I offended you?”

3. *Ask for the other person’s help in understanding him or her, but try not to defend or disagree.* Under intense conditions, it may be difficult to allow the other person to continue speaking and to not interrupt. If interruption starts, before long both of you will be reacting to each other, and the situation will get completely out of control. Ethical persuasion (EP) looks at using one’s feelings as important components to the discussion and not about suppressing them or giving in to them. The point is to not simply react or overreact. You have other, more useful options. In this step, you will keep your reactions in control until you have gained a thorough understanding of what the other person is saying and feeling. Consider one or more of these statements:

- “I think I understand. Is this what you mean?”
- “I could be wrong, so would you explain what you mean by that?”
- “If I’m jumping to conclusions, please help me see the big picture.”

4. *Repeat the other person’s position, in your own words, to show you really understand.* Under intense conditions, this may be challenging. Further, if not done in a sensitive manner, it may even sound sarcastic and patronizing. With sincerity and interest, you might use one of these openers:

- “It’s important that I understand you. Let me see if I can put your description of the problem into my own words.”
- “OK, let’s see if I get it. What I hear you saying is…”
- “I think you’re telling me that…”

5. *Ask the other person to correct your understanding and restate his or her position.* If the other person does not agree with your restatement of the problem, he or she may verbalize disagreement or show it in body language or facial expressions. Either way, to ensure mutual understanding, you might try one of these responses:

- “OK. I guess I still don’t get it. Would you explain it to me again?”
- “Sorry, I’m not seeing that part of it. Please tell me again how you see it.”
- “I guess I’m not following you. What did you mean when you said…”

6. *Refer back to your position only to keep the conversation active.* You may wish to use this step at anytime in this process. The goal throughout the seven steps is to maintain a respectful conversation while drawing out the other person’s feelings and viewpoint. You’re not hiding your position; you’re simply allowing the other person to do most of the explaining first. Try one of these statements:

- “I’d like to be certain I fully understand what you’re telling me before we get into my view of things. So, I’ll just answer your specific questions, and then I’d like to hear the rest of your view.”
- “I’m raising the issue because I’m concerned, but I’d first like to hear your side.”
- “Because you’ve asked, I’ll tell you how I see this aspect of it. Then, I’d like to return to your explanation.”

7. *Repeat steps 1 through 6 until the other person unreservedly agrees that you understand his or her position.* Within this step, you will cycle back through the previous six steps until you both fully agree that you have understood the other person’s point of view and position. It is important that neither of you assumes that full understanding has been reached and, therefore, prematurely ends the period of disclosure. To ensure that you understand and that the other person is comfortable with your level of understanding, you might try using one of these responses:

- “I believe I understand what you’re telling me. Let me give it back to you in my own words. Then, you can correct any parts of it that I may have misunderstood.”
- “I appreciate your patience while I’ve been trying to understand you. Here’s how I would describe your position and feelings.”

- “I’d like to share with you my understanding of what you’ve just told me. Please correct me in any area I got wrong.”

Now you have the tools for using Ethical Persuasion. Be aware that this is not a natural process. It takes concentration, patience, and practice. The author equates the EP process to learning a foreign language. In language classes, you are asked to use and repeat phrases that may not be clear to you. At first, you may feel self-conscious, perhaps even silly. Using the suggested EP phrases may initially seem completely artificial. The good news is, after using the EP tools and realizing success during episodes of confusion and discord, you’ll become increasingly more comfortable using them or similar derivations. If, in first attempts at EP, you find that you are visibly uncomfortable, you can offer a simple statement to the other person: “Look, I’m really trying to hear you and understand. Please continue, and then I’ll tell you how I feel (p. 83).”

At times, you may feel some form of resistance from within and even struggle to pull it off, as described in these steps. After years of *not* using the steps of EP, you may feel pulled to interject *your* point of view and feelings before you have allowed the other person to complete his or her explanation (p. 82). In some situations, your willingness to let the other person do all the talking may feel like you’re giving in. In other words, saying “I understand... may be misinterpreted as “I surrender” (p. 83). Related to this concern is the fear that you may actually be mistaken, and that you may have to admit your error. By allowing the other person to fully explain, you may learn that your position was “off track” (p. 85). Finally, the other person may disclose some aspect of the issue that you don’t want to face (p. 86).

Regardless of your fears, feelings of process artificiality, or episodes of resistance, the author reminds the reader that one cure applies to all: courage. Although some unpleasant discoveries may come to light during the process, you will gain greater understanding and, then, be able to discuss the issue calmly and openly. Without sounding like a shallow television commercial, the author assures the new user of EP that steps leading to creative resolution will be more easily managed, fear of challenge or confrontation will be greatly reduced, and relationships will improve. The author concludes by stating, “The best way to earn someone’s rapt attention is to give him or her the rare experience of being fully heard and understood (p. 86).”

Note: This article is the first of two. “Phase II. Explaining Your Viewpoint” will be distributed in the spring 2006 term.

Rusk, T., with Miller, D. (1993). *The Power of Ethical Persuasion*. New York: Viking.

Prepared by Susan Clair, FDR graduate assistant.