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Influence Through Common Ground

Believing we are “right” and the other person is “wrong” or that there is a right or wrong way to approach a situation is the poison of influence. When I was hired to start up a training and development group in a large corporation, I remember getting into an end of day “debate” with my manager about the training approach we should take. Given I had a Master’s degree in Instructional Design, I firmly believed that there was a “right way” to design and develop training and that the current approach was too loose and not being done in a validated way. I remember feeling “justified” in my thinking and that the current approach was “wrong”. As we talked, I could sense her frustration growing but I wanted to cling to my opinion, because it was “right”. Finally, with an exhausted tone, she said as she left my office, “I need to get home now, but I wonder, could there be more than one way to approach this?” After she left, it struck me how ineffective my approach to the conversation had been and it got me curious to explore alternatives. What I have learned over time is that when I have strong ideas and opinions on how to do things, my level of study, research, etc.. doesn’t matter if I can’t consider the other person’s perspective, connect my idea to what matters to them, or speak using language that the other person can relate to.

Persuasion is a powerful tool in creating change, but those who seek to influence others must be strategic in their approach, especially when navigating touchy subjects.

As Russia's invasion of Ukraine escalated, several companies showed their support for Ukrainian refugees and sought to undermine the Kremlin's efforts to spread disinformation within the country. One group in particular figured out a way to distribute emails to Russian citizens in an effort to spread transparency about the conflict. They had to ensure that the messages be worded in a way that would not be met with opposition or incur negative feelings in the receiver. The emails had to provide clarity while appealing to the recipient's perspective and finding common ground, which would allow the group to set a positive precedent despite the opposing views.

This approach of finding common ground as a key step in influencing change can be applied to a variety of situations and subjects, whether it is on a personal or global level. Recently, a SCOTUS decision draft was leaked which revealed their intent to strike down Roe v. Wade, a monumental decision that protects the right to an abortion. The news spurred widespread controversy and restarted conversations about abortion rights. Discussions about abortion are often passionate and volatile, and influencing other's beliefs about the topic is not a simple task. What if we were to engage people with opposing positions in conversations that focused on common interests and needs instead of only talking about what they disagree on? What if we stayed open to listening to understand the perspective of others, especially when we disagreed with their positions? What if we stayed open to the possibility that there is more than one way? I developed the MAPIT conversation tool as a way to support this approach:

M: Mindset. A desire to create a win/win solution.

A: Ask. Be curious and open to asking and answering questions

P: Position. What is the point of view/perspective of each person?

I: Interest. What are the underlying shared common interests that underpin those positions?

T: Test. Test out potential solutions that address the common interest(s)

This approach seeks to find solutions and explanations that are more likely to be received in a positive way, thereby influencing others while avoiding an aggressive or confrontational reaction.

There are many ways to have a discussion with someone who disagrees with you, but what is most important is to have an open mind. Be open with your thoughts, feelings and ideas, and encourage the other person to do the same. Ask yourself: How do you typically try to influence people with opposing views? Do you get stuck on your position(s) or do you explore common interests? Do you approach the conversation with a “win/win” mindset or an “I am right and you are wrong” mindset? Do you stay curious and ask questions or do you judge? Every conversation is an opportunity to influence positive change...If we just stay open, curious and empathetic.

To download the MAPIT model for yourself, click [here](#).

To read Julia Minson’s TIME feature “How I Am Using Psychology to Persuade Russians of the Truth About Ukraine”, click [here](#).





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