

Channels of influence

"Do as you would be done by" - sometimes known as "the golden rule" - is a good guide to ethical behaviour. But when we want to influence others we can fall into the trap of thinking they'll be persuaded the same way we will. We might set out the rational case for doing something, people agree it makes sense... but then nothing happens. So we put even more effort into patiently arguing our case, and still get no result. The reason? Perhaps the people we're talking to aren't influenced by logic as much as we are. Maybe for them values or politics matter more.

The question we need to ask ourselves is "why would this person co-operate with me?" We're asking someone to change the way they think, or feel, or act, to make different choices than they might otherwise have done, to invest time, energy, support in a project of ours. Why would they? If we can't answer the question, it's unlikely that a clever argument or smart presentation will do the trick.

Successfully influencing others involves first understanding what motivates them, and how they make choices. Selling starts with the art of listening well - as Stephen Covey says, "seek first to understand before being understood."

Here are seven different "channels of influence". If we've taken the trouble to get to know our audience we have a better chance of choosing the channel, or mix of channels, that works best for them:

Thinking - This is objectively, rationally the right course of action. If I explain my proposal logically enough you'll be convinced by the benefits I've set out.

Feelings - I can show you how doing this will make others you care about more warmly-disposed towards you. This course of action will reduce conflict and increase harmony - we'll all be more content as a result.

Values - This is the right, ethical, fair thing to do. The values that guide your choices are the same values underpinning this course of action.

Vision - Just imagine what things will be like when we do this! If I paint an enticing picture of positive possibilities then you'll be bought into the vision I'm offering.

Interests - I can show you how what I'm proposing will help you achieve your goals - your interests and mine are overlapping.

Politics - I can show you how people with power are in favour of this. Going along with what I'm proposing will advantage you and enhance your reputation in the eyes of people who matter.

Reciprocity - In the past I've gone out of my way to help you with your priorities, and now I'd like you to help me with my mine. If you co-operate with me, I'll support you next time you're looking for help.