INFLUENCING ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS TO PROMOTE YOUR CAUSE

The following general principles have been established for ways in which to influence attitudes and behavior. These guidelines emerged from research and experience in laboratory or real life settings involving diverse areas such as education, business, public health, and political change. Because individuals differ and situations vary, these techniques will not always work. However, if applied creatively, in combination, over time, and in ways applicable to the situation, these principles will help you to promote your cause. To best utilize these ideas, time will be needed in order to brainstorm, practice, set objectives, and regularly evaluate progress. At times, it may require doing research about the individuals or groups you want to reach and their particular circumstances. This can be done either informally or using a more structured approach, such as a poll. These principles are applicable whether your “audience” is approached in one-on-one or small group conversation, through speeches, by written materials, or via media. As you strategize, you will need to determine a) the causes of the situation you want to change, b) the proposed solution, and c) who has the power to make the change that is needed. Determine what advocates can apply pressure and what groups actually set the policy you want to change.

Consider which principles outlined here are most applicable to your work and how best to apply them. Such an effort may require that you eliminate certain tactics of yours and, perhaps, expand your efforts later. You will also need to judge whether any tactics are considered unethical. Finally, please note that most of the ideas below derive from work in psychology. There are other social change perspectives and principles that might also be helpful— and sometimes necessary— in order for you to reach certain goals, such as knowledge from political science, sociology, communications, marketing, religion, the arts, or from activists who have learned from practical experience.

I) Deep Listening

There are several reasons why it is important to listen to the views and understand the feelings of those you are hoping to influence. These reasons include:

- Listening helps affirm the people you are speaking with. In doing so, you acknowledge that they have something legitimate to say, as do you.
- Listening to their view on the topic and rationale gives them more of an opportunity to explore their stance.
- By listening to them, there is a greater chance they will listen to you.
- Listening to people allows you to understand what they feel and why. This information can be useful for framing your own message during the discussion or for a later interaction.

II) Influencing Attitudes (Although the below describes attempts to influence the attitudes of others, we also learn from honest dialogue in which both parties are open to change.)

A) Aspects of the message you present:

- Besides any facts you present, provide vivid and dramatic examples and/or images that support your case (i.e. focus on more specific examples/images rather than statistics).
• Link your cause with American values such as: freedom, equality, individuality, family, fairness, caring, privacy, opportunity, etc.
• Contrast your position with less favorable alternatives.
• Typically, what is viewed as scarce may also be more attractive, such as a commodity in short supply or a proposed policy that can only be adopted for a limited time.
• Give examples of others who are credible and support your position (experts, trustworthy individuals, and those speaking against their own self-interest).
• Create positive or negative moods by associating your cause with words, labels, or ideas that bring about particular emotions. For a political cause, you might do as President Reagan did when he said that his policies were “in the tradition of John Kennedy” or as Central American activists did when they said that we “didn't want to have another Vietnam in El Salvador”. Another example is to frame messages to an audience, such as “Do you support the constitutional right to”. Well-conceived usage of symbols and/or slogans can be powerful.
• If you want to utilize fear in your message, the threat must seem real. People must feel that they are able to adopt the new behavior or attitude you propose, and in doing so, their fear will be alleviated.
• Reiterate important messages over time and with a new twist.

B) Basing messages on the listener's current opinion

• Give incentives as to why it is personally beneficial for them to adopt your position and the topic should be relevant to their life. It can be useful to frame your language in terms of your audience
• An audience will be more inclined to listen closely to an argument when discussing concerning issues, in which case, the quality of your argument is most important. Those with only limited concern for an issue, which is likely the majority of your audience, may not fully listen to your argument until it becomes relevant to them. Until then, peripheral factors can be even more important. For example, whether you seem believable and knowledgeable; whether you possess “eyewitness testimony” on a topic; whether you are associated with people your audience respect and can identify with; whether they see you as similar to themselves; or whether you are friendly, appealing, and physically attractive. We are particularly influenced by those we like; however, such peripherally-based attitudes are more superficial, last for a shorter period of time, and tend to change. When a topic is of limited concern to people, more arousing and less rational approaches are, in general, better. Arguments should not be complex, except when dealing with “true intellectuals”.
• It can be easier to foster a new opinion or integrate your message into the values that currently exist for a person, rather than changing their current attitude. Thus, do background research if you can. Try to highlight aspects of your audience’s views that are consistent with your perspective so that there are some points of agreement. A message that differs too far from someone's present attitude will likely be rejected, especially regarding important topics to the person.
• Gear your message to the reason(s) why your audience has the opinions they do on a topic. As yourself, what function does the attitude serve for them and can your message serve the same function? Most importantly, you should determine their general needs that you can appeal to and further emphasize by asserting that they can meet those same needs if they take on particular new attitude or behavior. Perhaps, you can discover what factors or forces help maintain their current attitude/ behavior and how you might counteract that influence.
• Address inconsistencies ("cognitive dissonance") in people's attitudes and behaviors, particularly as they might relate to their self-image, and provide a new way of being or thinking that is consistent with your position and that allows them to move away from their inconsistency.

C) Aspects of the source, interaction, and setting:

• An "active" audience is more likely to be effected. So ask listeners to consider your arguments, or direct them to imagine how they would feel if they acquired the new attitude or behavior you propose, or ask them rhetorical questions.
• Groups having a non-majority view on a topic are more likely to win others over if they are consistent over time in their thoughts but with a new twist and appear confident in their views.
• Attempt to affect the leaders of a group whose members you want to influence.
• During conversations, avoid being arrogant and judgmental, and take notice to non-verbal ques.

III) Promoting behaviors which will help your cause (e.g., volunteering, voting, practicing socially responsible behavior, talking to friends about an issue, going to events, or giving money)

• It is most important to influence the attitude toward the particular behavior rather than a general attitude about the political issue involved. For example, you should argue why it is important to write or volunteer time rather than influencing someone's attitude on promoting good health care and assuming that a favorable attitude will lead to action.
• Make it as easy as you can for people to take the actions you desire by providing various options and incentives and limiting the negative effects. For example, limit the time involvement for volunteers by recruiting many people, have a very structured task, or give volunteers specific tasks that contribute to the overall goal. Again, there is need to direct efforts to more than merely establishing the general worthiness of your cause. Personal motivations dictate or influence political behaviors and many people need more incentive than simply hoping to reach a political goal, except those who are truly committed. Specifically relating to volunteers, there are also a number of ways to increase participation which include: a) giving volunteers responsibility and proper training, b) providing reinforcement, c) utilizing talents and expertise, and d) meeting their needs and values by providing them options for what to work on. Also, have a system whereby the person benefits materially or psychologically by taking action. For some actions, it is good to also give feedback on how well the person is doing.
• Emphasize the connection between your work, the desired action you wish, and their life's concerns (if you know that). The more important an attitude or issue is to a helper's life, the more likely they will act upon it. People do not have time to act on every issue they have an opinion on.
• Promote the idea that people have the ability to take action. It is within their power. The more effective people feel, the more likely they will participate. Convey the idea that your goals are attainable through their help and the help of people in general. The goals you set can even be limited in nature, as long as their attainment helps lead to the final political goal sought. Show, when possible, that efforts regarding what you desire are already underway.
• People are more likely to go from having a positive attitude on an issue to taking action, if the action is viewed as socially desirable.
• The more time an audience has to think about an issue or the more readily an attitude comes to mind, the more likely their favorable attitude will lead to relevant actions. Thus, remind people of their favorable attitude on an issue.
• Get people to take small actions relevant to an issue, such as signing a petition, volunteering for an hour, or giving a small amount of money. Doing so makes it more likely that they will participate to a greater extent in the future. Changes in behavior will also influence one's attitude, sometimes leading to further behavioral change. One of the stronger influences on attitudes and behavior is previous behavioral change, in whichever noncoercive way that occurs. People may very well do something small if they have first had to turn down a larger request.
• A person is more likely to follow through with a commitment if it is made public.
• People are more likely to help on a project if they have previously helped.
• Encourage a sense of responsibility to get involved (e.g. they are helping those in desperate need).
• Assert that they are the kind of people who like to help and get involved so they are more likely to acquire such a self-identity.
• Have others, who are similar, demonstrate the kinds of behaviors you wish them to do.

IV) Ways of spreading your message to the public
• Distribute/post fliers or fact-based postal sized cards in public places such as windshields;
• Send letters to the editor, write “op-eds” for newspapers, or do “speak out” editorials on local TV/radio;
• Ask to use the window or floor space of a business for displays;
• Have speakers give talks or show videos/films at service clubs, churches, schools, etc.;
• Stage community forums or debates;
• Host neighborhood potlucks and informal discussions;
• Provide materials to schools and churches;
• Perform guerrilla theatre;
• Paint murals on walls;
• Set up a table/booth in a public place (malls, flea markets, street corners) to distribute literature and have passersby write letters;
• Canvass a neighborhood;
• Prepare pictorial or other displays for libraries, schools, museums, etc.;
• Insert cartoons, news clippings, or brief articles in correspondence;
• Distribute videos of talks, workshops, and conferences;
• Arrange a political parade or make a float for a parade;
• Get popular personalities to speak out;
• Set up political fairs;
• Hold regular vigils;
• List events in community calendars;
• Conduct a regular Sunday school class;
• Start a political essay or poetry contest;
• Stage a political play;
• Hold a house meeting and meal to discuss issues with others;
• Ask a cereal manufacturer to use the back of a box for a political concern;
• Walk around a busy street with a political poster on your chest and back;
• Put up political signs on lawns and in home windows;
• Place political stickers on cars, on home mailboxes, letters, etc.;
• Set up political literature boxes at schools and churches;
• Get textbook publishers and local libraries to cover your political agenda;
• Establish a church political library;
• Get a church to become involved in particular political concerns;
• Get local radio stations to sponsor music-related political events (concerts, dances, festivals);
• Call radio talk shows;
• Place notices, articles, ads, inserts, and classifieds in a church, club, school newspapers, newsletters, or “trading post” publications;
• Do a billboard or bus shelter display;
• Ask a newspaper to have a social issue column;
• Regularly send political materials and ideas to local media;
• Ask a skywriter to do a political message at a big event;
• Print political messages on cards, calendars, scratchpads, stationary, order forms/ invoices, business cards, matchbooks, etc.;
• Prepare a political public service announcement;
• Hold press conferences with public figures;
• Present programs on public access TV;
• Stage unusual events;
• Sponsor teams;
• Utilize electronic mail, bulletin boards, listservs, or web pages
• Spread the word to advocate for communities and contact government officials;
• Call/write elected officials

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