

Winning Conversations

How to win clients over in 15 minutes



About the Paper

I know we all like to think of ourselves as “trusted advisors”, however, what does being a trusted advisor actually mean?

I was once in a meeting with a government client that provides services to other government departments. In fact, the other government departments were obligated to use my client’s service. My client’s organisation purpose statement included that they were “A trusted advisor to government.” In the meeting pre-amble, my client mentioned that they were a trusted advisor to the department we were meeting with. The deputy secretary stopped my client in his tracks. He said. “I’m sorry, whether you are a trusted advisor of us is not for you to decide. It is my choice and it is earned, not labelled.”

Now the deputy secretary knew how to make a statement. He said it with such aplomb, without any disdain, it was delivered with mastery. It has stayed with me ever since and I have taken the view ever since that I must earn my client’s trust.

Here in lies the problem. If I can’t get my client or stakeholder to try my product, service or to implement my advice so they can develop trust in me, how can I become a trusted advisor? The answer of course is that first you need to be persuasive. You need to persuade your them to take a risk on you.

This paper is about those 15 minutes you have with a client or senior leader when you are making your pitch or stating your case and you do not already have the needle on the trust meter maxing out. It is about ensuring all those hours of hard work preparing for that moment are not wasted in that 15-minute window you have battled to get.

It is all about a winning conversation in 15 minutes.

“The winning conversations workshop really assisted in helping me prepare for some difficult conversations I had been putting off. I now have a framework I can use to help tackle any conversation comfortably and for me, that is worth its weight in gold.”
-Jacqui Nolan-Neylen, Co-founder, Revvies Energy Strips

Capability to Compete

We live in a very competitive world. We compete for attention, for sales, for resources. Every conversation in business, even the most collaborative ones, has a level of competition to it.

Are you and your people capable enough to compete? Are you as capable as your competition? Are you able to hit your numbers, especially when every time you hit the numbers the expectation goes up for next year?

Sometimes you know you have capable people but it does not seem to translate into the level of success you expect. Sometimes you don't get the results despite being technically more capable. Sometimes you wonder if it is something about you rather than what you are offering.

Stop second-guessing yourself. You have a great offering. You know it will benefit them more than they can see.

The problem is actually one of translation.

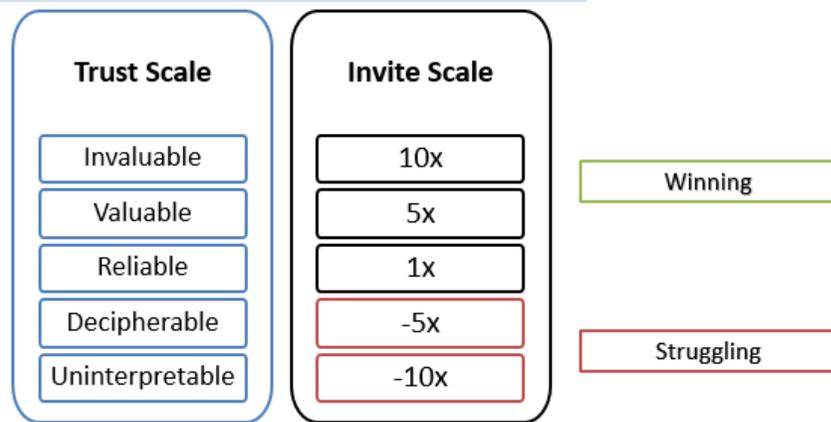
You need to be understood to create value

Think of what it is like when carrying on an important conversation with someone who does not speak your language and you do not speak theirs. Only the most rudimentary messages can be communicated. Advice of the type you give would be indecipherable.

You get yourself an interpreter. A reliable one. And they do their best to get the message across. Yes, the core of it gets across. Not the whole value, not the nuances.

You learn to speak the language fluently. You will do a great job of ensuring they understand the value of your offering.

However, if you are fluent and you have immersed yourself in their culture your offering can be seen to be as invaluable as you know it is. A winning conversation.



Why people can be difficult to convince

There are three main things going on with people you are trying to persuade, however, they are inexorably linked. First, because you want something from or of them, they are often wary about your motivations. For example, are you trying to sell me this or advising me to do that or asking me for my commitment because it is in your best interests rather than mine?

Second, everyone wants it easy. Sometimes the best way forward is a hard path.

Third, because of one and two and because of a whole bunch of other reasons, they are not thinking clearly about the decisions they need to make. They have blind spots. We all do. Every one of us have developed a host of psychological biases over the years based on our genes, our values that have been instilled in us and our life experiences. These biases are very difficult to overcome without help.

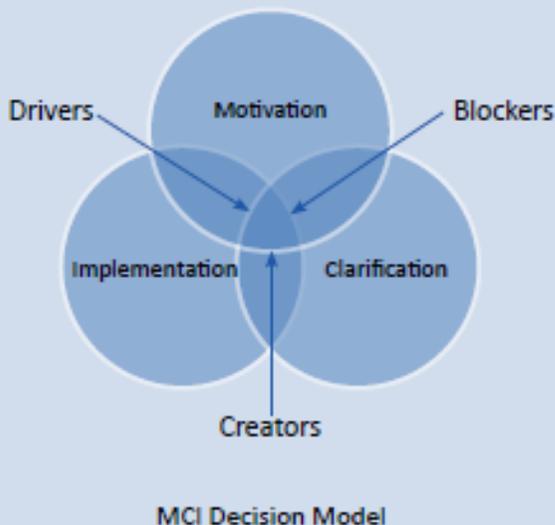
What you need to do is help them to see their blindspots. To do this you will need to find a pathway to get inside their head, to understand their biases or other potential errors in their decision-making process and to implant your solution right in the engine room of their brain.

Finding the pathway to persuasion

I am sure you will agree that finding the right pathway to gain someone's agreement can be an interesting challenge. You have probably tried many different methods. There is no doubt variety is important, however, finding the right variety for the person you are wishing to influence is key.

In a moment I will introduce you to my Pathfinder Model to help you find the right pathway to cut through barriers of resistance. First, however, you need to find the chink in their armor. Their fatal flaw in their decision-making process. The one that probably lead them to the reason you are having this conversation right now.

The way I do this is through my MCI Decision Model which is shown to the left. The premise of the MCI model is to flip our inherent decision-making process on its head. To start with motivation, then move to clarification and finally focus on implementation. This is inverse to our natural tendency to start with implementation, then do some clarification (after we have made the decision to proceed) and completely ignore the need to understand our motivation to ensure a good decision is being made.



Hypothetical

Consider this: You are a marketing consultant and a while back your client was considering revising their marketing strategy. The first idea they considered was to start a blog. They thought through what they would write about and how that would attract customers. They decided for one reason or another that it didn't sound like such a brilliant idea so they moved onto the next idea which is was a broader social-media campaign using Facebook and Twitter.

Again they decided that was not such a great idea because the target market isn't very active on Facebook and Twitter despite everyone saying they were great for marketing. Then they get the idea to use LinkedIn to get more of the right contacts and to start developing relationships with them. Soon they developed a LinkedIn strategy which included a massive budget for LinkedIn Advertising, they had paid for all their key staff to have their LinkedIn profiles prepared professionally and they set targets for their staff on numbers of connections, connection requests, inmails sent and posts made.

Then they hired your firm to advise on their LinkedIn strategy. First you do some clarification of how they were conducting their campaign. You also checked their findings on Facebook and Twitter as marketing options. Soon you realise that their expectations of what social media was going to do for them were completely wrong. You realise they were answering the wrong question. While their motivation to find new avenues to grow the business was in line with a social media strategy, they had not clarified if their first bright idea, social media, was the optimum solution. What they actually needed was a re-energisation of their traditional business development channels. Some phone calls, some nurturing and some requests for referrals. You will need to persuade them that they were wrong and the money expended to date was all but wasted.

The MCI Decision Model helps you identify where they are and even where they are going wrong in their decision-making process so you can design your approach to persuading them using my Pathfinder Model.

"I had the pleasure of attending Bryan Whitefield's Winning Conversation Workshop delivered for Leadership Think Tank recently. Bryan's style of facilitation was totally engaging and thought provoking. The models shared by Bryan at the workshop has really assisted my preparation for meetings and my confidence has grown as a result. A very valuable, worthwhile workshop. Thank you so much!"

-Cath Shaw, Founder, Positive Living Skills



The Pathfinder Model

The Pathfinder Model is a simple process that asks you to:

- **Stand** in the shoes of the person you are trying to persuade, so that you understand them. So you can align your offering or solution with their goals.
- **Paint** them a picture with a diagram or picture that allows them to understand with clarity your offering. If you don't they will form their own mental picture and it might not be what you think.
- **Tell** them a story so they connect with you and with your offering. Decisions are heavily influenced by emotions.
- **Make** them believe through stats and case studies as well as answers to all their counter arguments.

The reason this approach works is that penetrating the barriers people put up when receiving advice is a big challenge. Finding the chink in their armor, the error in their decision making is one thing. It is another thing all together to fully penetrate their thinking and embed your advice deep into their thinking.

What should you do next?

Like so many other skills in life, you can learn to become more persuasive and I have provided you a simple formula. Some elements of the formula you will already do well. Your challenge is to master every one of them.

If you take on the challenge to master all elements of the Pathfinder Model you should definitely read one or more of the classics in this space including Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, David Maister's *The Trusted Advisor* and Robert Cialdini's *Influence*.

To really get inside the heads of those you need to influence, to identify the risk in their decision making, I can recommend the unilaterally acclaimed *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman, *Decisive* by Chip and Dan Heath and *Why Decisions Fail* by Paul C Nutt. And if you like the MCI Model and want to get to know the ins and outs of it, contact me for a complimentary copy of my book *DECIDE How to Manage the Risk in Your Decision Making* or buy it online via my website or Amazon and other quality online book retailers.

Finally, you should check out my website and see if I am running one of my masterclasses or get in touch with me about the one or two-day program I run in-house for organisations of all sizes. Everyone has a boss or a powerful stakeholder to persuade. And even if you are the CEO you can learn more about persuasion.

About the Author

I have been working as an advisor internally and externally for 30 years throughout my journey from chemical engineer, to risk engineer to management consultant. I have worked with hundreds of organisations across the public and private sector and all sectors of industry. So I know that all advisors and those they advise face the same problem – giving and receiving valuable advice, succinctly and with clarity.

Because of my background in risk and particularly risk based decision making, I came to realise that we all genuinely have trouble thinking with clarity when making key decisions. Even with a solid risk assessment in front of them I witnessed poor decisions being made by senior leaders. That is, I failed to influence their decision appropriately.

This made me realise how critical and difficult the role of advisors is. It is not enough to provide decision makers with well thought through options, advisors must understand the elements that may prevent good decisions being made and break them down.

Over the years I researched and studied many authors, models and approaches in my quest to better understand how advisors can maximise their ability to persuade and I have found a method that works for me and for many, many others I have had the pleasure of teaching through my training and mentoring programs and during the course of consulting assignments.

I have authored many papers over the years and in 2015 I took the plunge and wrote my first book, *DECIDE How to Manage the Risk in your Decision Making*.



The more I use the MCI Decision Model on which the book is based the more convinced I am of the value of a simple model that can be used day-to-day, in business and for personal decision making. It never ceases to amaze me how we manage to trick ourselves into a poor decision so convincingly and easily.

Master the methods you have found here in this paper and you will have significantly more control over your own destiny as you will be a Persuasive Advisor.

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