



# The subtle art of graceful persuasion

EAs spend a lot of time trying to convince their boss. If your directions or suggestions are falling on deaf ears, *Bryan Whitefield* is here to help



## THE EXPERTS

Bryan Whitefield mentors executives in organisations to increase their influence and improve decisions across their organisation. He is the author of *Winning Conversations: How to turn red tape into blue ribbon* and delivers his Persuasive Adviser Program across all sectors of the economy

**Tell a small child** in a loud angry voice they are doing something wrong. Now look into their eyes. What do you see? If the child is anything like my three kids, you will see resentment or defiance. No one likes to be told they are wrong. Including CEOs that say they want you to challenge them.

While persuasion is not always about correcting an error in judgement, it is always about influencing a decision. That could be very early on for a key decision or anytime during the decision-making process.

Here is the opportunity for EAs. Our human error rate in decision making for complex decisions is about 16 percent.<sup>1</sup> That is one in every six decisions are wrong. And you and your boss are not immune.

Everyone makes mistakes, and some hurt much more than others. Some you have watched them happen and tried to warn your boss away. However, you can only push so far, after all, as an EA you must work closely with your boss. Your relationship is paramount.

Hence, the subtle art of graceful persuasion. Quietly influencing so that boss doesn't even know it is happening. In his seminal 1984 book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, Robert Cialdini introduced his six principles of persuasion:

- **Reciprocity:** When someone gives us something, we want to return the favour.
- **Commitment and consistency:** People like to show they are consistent in their actions.
- **Social proof:** We look to others for confirmation on what we should be doing or liking. Think fashion, music or management trends.
- **Liking:** If we like someone we are much more likely to listen to them and do as they wish.
- **Authority:** We are more likely to comply when urged by an authority figure.
- **Scarcity:** We don't like missing out, which is why retailers use promotional tags such as 'limited stock'.

While each of these are valid principles, his principles are mainly designed for new relationships. Not for the unique relationship between CEO and EA. For your challenge of subtle persuasion, follow these four principles.

## Stand in your CEO's shoes

Think about when you have felt hurt by your boss. They have probably forgotten to think about your feelings and what was happening in your life. As an EA you are expected to be always switched on, ready to handle the complexity of tasks coming your way, with resilience. That can not always be the case.

When you need to influence your boss, have a long and hard think about what is going on in their heads right now. What are their work and personal pressures? Good and bad. Here you will find what is their motivation on the decision at hand. And their motivation may be clouding their judgement.

## Paint them a picture

A picture is worth a thousand words. What photo or diagram can you show your boss that might make them think differently? A photo of a workplace or scene of complexity or serenity? Think outside the box to find the emotion you wish to stir in your boss.

## Tell them a story

Like pictures, stories stir emotion. And research has shown our decisions are made on emotion first, logic second. If your boss does not feel good about a decision, they won't take the path you are recommending. Despite the facts.

## Make them believe

Be ready with the facts. Once they are ready to listen. Now give them the hard facts or the core logic. And if you are speaking outside your expertise, try to ensure you have a quote or data from one of your boss's respected sources. ❌

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, David J (2011). Reliability, Maintainability and Risk, 8th ed., Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford U.K.