

# The Power to

How masters of “supersuasion” can change your mind

By Kevin Dutton

*“Nothing is so unbelievable that oratory cannot make it acceptable.”*

—Marcus Tullius Cicero

I don't know about you, but most of my attempts at persuasion end up going 'round in circles: impassioned, long-winded affairs that seem as if they're working. But aren't. This is why I've become fascinated with something I call “supersuasion,” a brand-new kind of influence that disables our cognitive security systems in seconds. Animals do it [see box on page 26]. Babies do it [see box on page 29]. But for reasons that I've been exploring, most of us grownups seem to find it difficult. With one or two exceptions, of course.

My journey to understand the art of persuasion began a couple of years ago, with the simple idea that some of us are better at it than others. And that, just as with every other skill, there's a spectrum of talent along which each of us has our place. At one end are those who always say the wrong thing. At the other, the supersuaders, who always get it right. These black belts in influence hark back to the days of our ancestors; their powers of persuasion effortlessly recapitulating the immediate, instinctual response sets of our primeval, pre-conscious past. Their elite, flashbulb influence suffuses all before it. It is fast. It is simple. And it works. Immediately. Instantaneously. NOW.

You could call it the persuasion “hole in one.”

Take, for example, the man I encountered on a flight (business class, thanks to a film company I was working for) from London to New York. The guy across from me had a problem with his food. After several minutes of prodding it around his plate, he summoned the chief steward to his side.

“This food,” he enunciated, “sucks.”

The chief steward nodded and was very understanding. “Oh, we're very sorry!” he replied. “It's such a pity! How will we ever make it up to you?”

Not bad, I thought.

“Look,” continued the man (he was, one suspected, quite used to continuing). “I know it's not your fault. But it just isn't good enough. And you know what? I'm so fed up with people being nice!”

But then came something that totally changed the game. That didn't just turn the tables. It kicked 'em over.

“IS THAT RIGHT, YOU F\* \* \*INGD\* \* \*? THEN WHY THE F\* \* \* DON'T YOU SHUT UP, YOU F\* \* \* ING A \* \* HOLE?” Instantly, the whole cabin fell silent. Who the hell...?

A guy in one of the front seats turned around. He looked at the fellow who was complaining about his food, winked at him, and inquired, “Is that any better? Cause if it ain't, I can keep going.”



PHOTOILLUSTRATION BY AARON GOODMAN

## The Persuasion Instinct

**“Y**ou looking at my girl?” How many times has that particular question drawn an evening out to a close? Not so with elephants. During the mating season young male elephants, when they inadvertently encroach on females in estrus, give off what is known as an innocent scent, an olfactory signal to adult bull elephants that they are going to toe the line.

How many times have houseguests overstayed their welcome, because despite all your hints they somehow just didn't get that it was time to go? Not so with the thorny acacia tree of Central Africa. When insects start feeding on the thorny acacia too greedily, it produces a toxin that turns Michelin-starred leaves into pig swill. Not only that, it also gives off an odor, warning nearby acacias to put up the shutters themselves: an arboreal, chemical Twitter that there's a freeloader doing the rounds.

Examples such as these provide a pretty good flavor of how persuasion works in the animal kingdom. And it leaves what we humans do in the dust. There are no mixed messages, no beating around the bush (unless that bush happens to belong to a casso-



wary, in which case the phrase takes on a different, more ominous meaning) and no sitting down over coffee to talk about it. Instead, in the absence of consciousness and those ephemeral containers of meaning we call words, animals rely on what ethologists call key stimuli: environmental triggers (such as the innocent scent in elephants and the not so innocent scent in acacias) that initiate, when they are activated, instinctive behavioral responses.

For a moment, nobody said anything. Everyone, quite literally, *f-r-o-z-e*. But then, as if some secret neural tripwire had been pulled, our disgruntled diner ... smiled. And then he laughed. And then he *really* laughed. This, in turn, set the chief steward off. And that, of course, got us *all* started.

Problem solved with just a handful of simple words. And definitive proof, if ever any were needed, of what my old English teacher Mr. Johnson used to say: You can be as rude as you like, so long as you're polite about it.

Almost without effort, this connoisseur of curses (who also happened to be a famous musician) had used supersuasion to deflect an awkward situation and turn the tables another way. And he did so by uniting biology, psychology and neuroscience in a model of influence with five constituent factors—factors that may be handily arranged in the acro-

nym “SPICE”: Simplicity, Perceived self-interest, Incongruity, Confidence and Empathy.

Studies have taken these five elements apart one by one to show us how each one works in building toward supersuasion.

### Simplicity

“Easy to swallow, easy to follow” is the brain's heuristic for influence. This is one reason why the world's great orators have always spoken in threes. Julius Caesar's “*veni, vidi, vici*,” for example. Or Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address: “we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground.”

This device, known as the tricolon, is among a number of rhetorical secrets first identified by the speakers of the ancient world, classical orators such as Cicero, Demosthenes and Socrates (who themselves form a tricolon). Its magic lies in its efficiency: a third word not only gives confirmation and completes a point, it is also economical, constituting the earliest stage at which a possible connection, implied by the first two words, may be substantiated. More than three, and you risk going on and on. Fewer than three, and your argument lands prematurely.

The bottom line couldn't be any clearer: the shorter, sharper, simpler the message—tricolon again—the more amenable we are to its content.

Imagine I were to hand you a recipe for Japanese rolls—and that it was printed in this typeface (Times New Roman, 12 point). Next, imagine I

### FAST FACTS

#### Would You Like to Buy a Bridge?

- 1 Some people are masters of “supersuasion,” but the skill is not inborn; their techniques can be taught to anyone.
- 2 Humor is the key, especially if it catches your listeners off guard, leaving them laughing and open to suggestion.
- 3 Make people believe you have their best interests at heart, and you can persuade them to do almost anything.

DIETER HOELL age fotostock (elephant); CHRIS MATTISON FLPA/age fotostock (trees)

were to ask you to estimate how long it would take you to prepare the recipe. And then, how inclined you were to do so.

Question: Do you think you would rate the dish as being easier to cook if it were *printed in this typeface* (Brush, 12 point)? Or do you think that the typeface would make little difference to your judgment? Psychologists Hyunjin Song and Norbert Schwarz of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor put exactly this question to a group of college students in 2008. And guess what? The fussier the typeface, the more difficult the students judged the recipe. And what's more, the less likely they were to attempt it. Even though the recipes were exactly the same in both cases, the students walked into a classic cognitive ambush: they confused the facility with which they took in information with the resources required to comply with it. Result? The group gave Brush the brush-off.

#### Perceived Self-Interest

Several million years ago, when social networking was even more important than Facebook and

filled the promotional requirements and returned to the garage the stipulated eight times to claim their free car wash, compared with just 19 percent of the customers who weren't on the empirical fast track. Even though the offer was exactly the same for both groups—customers had to visit the car wash on eight occasions to earn their freebie—those initial two tokens created a powerful illusion: not only of something for nothing (a gesture of corporate goodwill triggering reciprocity) but also of client commitment. On receiving the vouchers that apparently gave them a two-point lead, customers thought to themselves: "Hey, I'm a fifth of the way there already. I might as well keep going." And so they were far more likely to continue with the scheme than those who had started supposedly from scratch.

This voucher trick is all about the art of framing—the presentation of information in a way that maximizes positive outcomes. And framing isn't just confined to advertising. Politicians do it. Attorneys do it. We all do it.

The key, as a persuader, is to present things in such a way that they appear to be not in your *own*

**It helps if people feel like they're being offered a good deal, especially if the good deal involves getting away with something.**

Twitter are today, the facility to be true to one's word, and to return favors accordingly, was synonymous with group cohesion. With individual cohesion, too: in the days before welfare and pest control, being ostracized was fatal.

But old evolutionary habits die hard—and the spectral remnants of exigencies past hover like neural phantoms on the dark, primeval stairwells of the brain [see box on page 31]. Take loyalty cards, for example. In 2006 psychologists Joseph Nunes and Xavier Dreze of the Wharton School of Marketing at the University of Pennsylvania presented the patrons of a car wash with two different types of voucher—each of which, when completed, entitled the beneficiary to a free visit. In both cases, eight stamps (corresponding to eight visits) were required to redeem the offer. But the vouchers differed from each other in one important feature. One consisted of eight blank circles, whereas the other consisted of 10, with the first two circles already voided out.

Which of the vouchers do you think proved the more effective? You got it—the one with the first two stamps thrown in ostensibly "for free." Of the customers given the 10-circle voucher, 34 percent ful-



Make people believe that they will get an exceptionally beneficial deal by doing what you want (even if they won't), and you go a long way toward persuading them.

# The best jokes are the ones we don't see coming. Our brains do a double take, and that's when they are most open to suggestion.

Humor plays an important part in supersuasion, most especially humor that arises from incongruities that catch the listener off guard.



best interests—but in those of whom you're trying to influence. Take, for example, the story of King Louis XI of France, a staunch believer in astrology. When a courtier correctly predicted the death of a member of his imperial household, the king worried that having such a powerful seer in his court might pose a threat to his authority. He summoned the man, planning to have him thrown to his death from a window ledge. But first he addressed him gravely. "You claim to be able to interpret the heavens," King Louis said, "and to know the fate of oth-

ers. So tell me: What fate will befall *you*, and how long do you have to live?"

The oracle thought carefully for a moment. Then he smiled.

"I shall meet my end," he replied, "just three days before Your Majesty meets his." A perfect, if apocryphal, example of the courtier using perceived self-interest on the *king's* part as a way to save his *own* life.

## (The Author)

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## Incongruity

The persuasive power of humor is second to none. If someone can make you laugh while trying to change your mind, chances are they're on to a winner. Not long ago in London, I walked past a homeless man selling a copy of the magazine the *Big Issue*, the proceeds of which go toward helping those living on the street. "Free delivery within 10 feet!" he called out. I bought one on the spot.

Precisely why humor is so powerful an influencer is an interesting question. The answer lies in one of its key ingredients, incongruity. The best jokes are the ones we don't see coming, and *because* we don't see them coming, they violate expectation. Our brains do a double take. And in that fraction of a second, while their backs, so to speak, are turned, our brains are open to suggestion.

The neurology of incongruity—what happens inside the brain as it is doing a double take—is well documented. Single cell recordings in monkeys show that the amygdala, the emotion center of the brain, is more sensitive to unexpected than expected presentations of both positive and negative stimuli. In humans, intracranial EEG recordings reveal increased activation in both the amygdala and the temporoparietal junction, a structure involved in novelty detection, on exposure to unusual events. Such findings confirm that incongruity not only gains our attention (a crucial component of any effective persuasion—just ask the guy in business class who complained about his dinner) but that it also lobbs a stun grenade between our ears. It disables cognitive functioning and compromises, for a brief but critical time window, our neural homeland security.

Yet incongruity isn't just about distraction. It's also about reframing—as a study by social psychologist David Strohmetz and his co-authors at Monmouth University demonstrated rather fiendishly in 2002. The study in question was conducted in a restaurant, and Strohmetz began by dividing diners up into three groups, according to how many candies the waiter handed out with the check.

To one group of diners the waiter gave one candy. To another, he gave two. And to the third—and this is where it gets interesting—he did the following. First he gave out one candy and then walked away ... then turned back around, as if he had

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## Fetal Attraction

Let's say you found a wallet on the street. What would you do? Take it to the nearest police station? Mail it back to the owner? Keep it? The answer, it emerges, depends less on a question of individual morality and a great deal more on our collective evolutionary heritage.

In 2009 psychologist Richard Wiseman of the University of Hertfordshire in England left a bunch of wallets on the streets of Edinburgh, Scotland, each of which contained one of four photographs: a happy family, a cute puppy, an elderly couple and a smiling baby. Which ones, he wondered, would be most likely to find their way home? There was no doubting the outcome: 88 percent of the wallets containing the picture of the smiling baby were returned, beating all the others out of sight.

The result, according to Wiseman, is not surprising. "The baby kicks off a caring feeling in people," he says, a nurturing instinct toward vulnerable infants that has evolved to safeguard the survival of future generations.

In 2009 Melanie Glocker of the Institute of Neural and Behavioral Biology at the University of Muenster in Germany flashed pictures of newborns to a group of childless women while they



underwent functional MRI. Using a special image-editing program, Glocker manipulated the pictures so that some of the infant faces incorporated higher "baby schema" values (large, round eyes; round, chubby face) whereas some had lower values (smaller eyes; narrower face). It wasn't just the program that was eye-opening. Results revealed that the faces with higher baby schema values precipitated an increase in activity not just in the amygdala (the brain's emotional control tower) but also in the nucleus accumbens, a key structure of the mesocorticolimbic system that mediates reward.

Similar findings to Glocker's have also been demonstrated acoustically. Kerstin Sander of the Leibniz Institute for Neurobiology in Germany compared amygdala responses to infants and adults crying and discovered something extraordinary: a 900 percent increase for babies. Additional research has taken things one stage further and revealed that although preverbal infant vocalizations do indeed increase amygdala activation, it is sudden and unexpected changes in crying pitch that convey the most emotion—further support for the role of incongruity in supersuasion.

changed his mind, and added another. So one group got one candy. And two groups got two. But the two who got two were given them in different ways. (I hope you're paying attention—there's a test later.)

Did the number of candies and the manner in which they were allocated bear any relation to tip size? You bet it did. Compared with a control group of diners who got no candies at all (charming), those who got one tipped, on average, 3.3 percent higher. Similarly, those who got two candies tipped 14.1 percent higher. But the biggest increase was shown by those who received first one candy, then another—a biblical escalation of philanthropic zeal 23 percent greater than their uncandied brethren.

That unexpected change of heart completely re-framed the situation. It instigated a whole new way of appraising the interaction. He's giving us special treatment, the diners thought to themselves. Let's give him something back.

### Confidence

Confidence, misplaced or otherwise, is catching. It's a privileged, though sometimes precarious, condition, fiercely independent of reality, that's transmitted sub-radar from one individual to another via language, belief and appearance. It's why con men enjoy their appellation, and why McDonald's and Nike bring out ads that declare "Just Do

It" and "I'm Loving It," as opposed to ads that say "I'm Thinking about It" or "I Kind of Like It." Influence without confidence is about as useful as an inflatable dartboard.



Context is everything: a fancy label and a high price tag can fool people into thinking that a wine tastes better than glasses from seemingly cheaper bottles.

# Exhibiting empathy helps to convince people that you have their best interests at heart, a surefire way to get them on your side.

Our reliance on confidence to help divine correctness—our deployment, that is, of a confidence heuristic—has been demonstrated in the lab. In 2008 Hilke Plassman, now associate professor of marketing at INSEAD Business School near Paris, sneakily switched the price tags on bottles of Cabernet Sauvignon. For some it was valued at \$10, for others at \$90.

Would the difference in price be reflected in a difference in taste? It sure would.

Volunteers rated the \$90 bottle considerably more drinkable than the \$10 bottle—even though both bottles, unbeknownst to them, contained exactly the same wine. And that wasn't all. Subsequently, during a functional MRI scan Plassman found that this simple sleight of mind was actually reflected anatomically, in neural activity deep within the brain. Not only did the “cheaper” wine taste cheaper and the “dearer” one, well, dearer; the supposedly more expensive wine generated increased activation in the medial orbitofrontal cortex, the part of the brain that responds to pleasurable experiences.

Similar results have also been found with experts. In 2001 cognitive psychologist Frédéric Brochet, then at the oenology research and teaching unit at the University of Bordeaux in France, took a midrange Bordeaux and served it in two different bottles. One was labeled as a splendid *grand cru*, the other as a *vin du table*.

Would the wine buffs smell a rat? Not a chance.

Despite the fact that, just as in the Plassman study, they were actually being served the same vintage, the experts appraised the different bottles differently. The *grand cru* was described as “agreeable, woody, complex, balanced and rounded,” whereas the *vin du table* was evaluated less salubriously—as “weak, short, light, flat and faulty.”

Confidence is a wormhole into truth. In ambiguous, dynamic or fluid situations, not only does it have the right air—it also has the air of being right.

## Empathy

In the summer of 1941 Sergeant James Allen Ward was awarded a Victoria Cross for bravery for clambering onto the wing of his Wellington bomber and, while flying 13,000 feet above the North Sea, extinguishing a fire in the starboard engine. He was secured, at the time, by just a single rope tied around his waist.

Some time later Winston Churchill summoned the shy and swashbuckling New Zealander to Number 10 Downing Street to congratulate him on his exploits. They got off to a shaky start. The fearless, daredevil airman, tongue-tied in the presence of the prime minister, was completely unable to field even the simplest of questions put to him. Churchill tried something different.

“You must feel very humble and awkward in my presence,” he began.

“Yes, sir,” replied Ward. “I do.”

“Then you can imagine,” Churchill said, “how humble and awkward I feel in yours.”

A brilliant double stroke of empathy—feeling the discomfort of his visitor and recasting it as though begging for the visitor to feel his—showed Churchill at his most disarming and persuasive. A warm, empathetic style will often convince people of your best intentions and bring them onboard.

Empathy has been shown to be important in the doctor-patient relationship, in which physicians

Being a good listener is not only persuasive, it can be self-protective: physicians who seem empathetic are less likely to be sued for malpractice.



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## Programs of Persuasion

Psychologist Robert Cialdini of Arizona State University has spent his entire career observing influence techniques not just in the lab but also in the real world. Cialdini has published his conclusions in a book, *Influence: Science and Practice*, fifth edition (Allyn & Bacon, 2008), where he identifies six core principles of social influence—all of which, he argues, have evolutionary underpinnings reaching far back into our ancestral history.

These core principles are as follows:

1. **Reciprocity**—we feel obligated to return favors.
2. **Liking**—we have a tendency to say yes to people whom we like.
3. **Scarcity**—we place more value on things that are in short supply.
4. **Social proof**—we look at what others are doing when we're not sure what to do ourselves.
5. **Authority**—we listen to experts and those in positions of power.
6. **Commitment and consistency**—we like to be true to our word and finish what we've started.



When in doubt, people naturally look to figures of authority and experience for guidance.

All of these principles tap (somewhat self-evidently given their evolutionary origins), one way or another, into issues of primeval survival—issues that in the 21st century are perhaps recapitulated a little more often than we think. What will happen if I don't fill up with gas? we mutter to ourselves in a fuel crisis (scarcity). Or at dinner: everyone else is using that funny-shaped spoon with the hook, so it's got to be right. Right? (Social proof.)

Because of this evolutionary lineage and of the strategies' explicit connection to ostensibly individual reward systems, they are all subsumed within the supersuasion model under the broader, more generic principle of perceived self-interest.

have to convince patients that they care about them and have their best interests at heart. This tactic not only makes for good medicine, it also has been shown to protect doctors from malpractice lawsuits. In 2002 Nalini Ambady, now a professor of psychology at Tufts University, divided physicians into two groups: those who'd been dragged through the court and those who hadn't. She made audiotapes of the doctors and their patients in session and then played the tapes to a group of students. The students were asked to determine which doctors had been sued.

But there was a catch. For each of the recordings the output was "content-filtered." All the students could hear was prosody: muffled, low-frequency garble, as if they were listening underwater.

How, linguistically, would the doctors measure up? Could the students, on the basis of intonation alone, somehow distinguish one group from another? The results were unequivocal: they could tell them a mile off. The doctors who had been sued sounded way more self-important. They had a dominant, hostile, less empathic conversational style—whereas those who had not been sued sounded warmer.

Forgive and forget? Live and let live? Only, it seems, if I like you.

The position of incongruity at the center of the SPICE model reflects its centrality to the idea of supersuasion. From calming someone down to raising

someone's spirits, from closing the deal to trying to bum a quarter from strangers on the street, defiance of expectation, script reversal, antithesis—call it what you will—lies at the very heart of supersuasion. Not only does incongruity enhance the aesthetic prowess of simplicity, it also knocks out the brain's surveillance mechanisms and thereby enables the rest of the SPICE task force to secretly slip in under the radar and hotwire our neural pleasure centers.

### Humor Is Key

Of course, incongruity is also the essence of humor—one of the most effective tools in disarming your interlocutor and becoming a supersuader.

Take a lesson from the following:

Jim stumbled out of a saloon right into the arms of Father McGuire.

"Inebriated again!" the priest scolded him. "Shame on you! When are you going to straighten out your life?"

"Father," Jim asked. "What causes arthritis?"

"I'll tell you what causes it," snapped the priest. "Drinking cheap whiskey, gambling and carousing around with loose women! How long have you had arthritis?"

"I don't," slurred Jim. "But the Bishop does."

Supersuasion doesn't just bring the house down. It clears up the rubble and carts it off in a dump truck. **M**