

LEADERSHIP

How to (Actually) Change Someone's Mind

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If you're a leader, it's likely that not everyone who works with you will agree with the decisions you make — and that's okay. Leadership involves making unpopular decisions while navigating complex relationships with colleagues, partners, and clients. But often, you will need to get buy-in from these constituents, and therefore you will need to convince them to change their mind.

There is little friction involved in convincing people who are your natural supporters. But trying to change the mind of a dissenter, or a *detractor*, is a different story. How do you go about convincing someone who, for one reason or another, doesn't see eye-to-eye with you? Someone who gives you a flat out “no”?

In the recent research we completed for Laura's book, *Edge: Turning Adversity into Advantage*, we observed, and then interviewed, more than 60 leaders who were trying to convince business associates and other constituents to change their minds on a course of action that they initially disagreed with. The leaders who were most successful in overcoming others' skepticism were those who diagnosed the root of the fundamental disagreement before trying to persuade. They first asked themselves, “What's driving my detractor's resistance?” These leaders often pinpointed which aspects of their arguments elicited the most pushback and the most emotional reactions. Then, depending on the answer, they approached the situation with one of the following three targeted strategies.

The Cognitive Conversation

When to use it: The detractor may be opposed to your argument because of an objective reason. If they've clearly articulated a logical set of objections, and they don't appear to be hiding ulterior motives, approach them with a cognitive

conversation. This is especially useful when the detractor is known to have a no-nonsense attitude and can easily set aside emotions in their decision-making process.

How it works: A successful cognitive conversation requires two things: sound arguments and good presentation. Take, for example, a situation where you are pushing to switch suppliers and you've found one whose materials and products are superior to the current supplier, whose products have been causing numerous downstream issues. But your colleague is in favor of sticking with your current supplier with whom he has a long-standing relationship. He expresses his resistance to your proposal by pointing out the higher prices the new supplier charges. You want to prepare sound arguments that disprove the detractor's objections. In this instance, you might point out that the new supplier is actually less expensive in the long run, when you take into account all the additional production costs cause by the current supplier. You also want to use a logical framework and clear storyline to force the detractor to reassess their thinking. For example, you can emphasize that the decision is based on cost, quality, and service, but above all, cost and quality.

Be cautious about not introducing emotions into the discussion, which could give the impression that you and your detractor are not on common ground. For example, you don't want to make it seem as if you believe your colleague's relationship with the former supplier is irrelevant. The goal is to show the person that, on an objective and factual basis, their initial stance on the situation isn't as reasonable as your argument. Be warned, these detractors are not easily swayed by broad generalizations. Be ready to mentally spar with them and come prepared with facts that back up each aspect of your overall argument.

The catch: Don't assume that getting a "yes" from this type of detractor signals a conversion into an everlasting supporter. You may have persuaded them on this specific issue, but they may disagree with you again in the future. If that's true, expect to have another cognitive conversation on that separate argument.

The Champion Conversion

When to use it: When the detractor isn't easily persuaded through cognitive arguments, or when they harbor a grievance in your relationship with them, engaging in debates may be futile. Take, for example, a management decision where you'd like to promote a qualified individual who performed brilliantly under your supervision, but a counterpart of yours argues that your subordinates often get promoted over hers. Even if your promotion candidate is objectively more deserving, others may still feel resentment and refuse to provide support.

How it works: Don't jump in and try to convince the other person. Instead, invest time in personally learning about and building rapport with them. Here, it's not about arguments or presentation, at least initially, but understanding their perspective and why they might feel personally affronted. For instance, you might ask questions about her team, and which team members she feels have the most potential. Gradually convert this detractor into someone who is your champion or advocate, perhaps by shedding more light on the qualities that you value in individuals, both on your team as well as your counterpart's team, or showing how you value her leadership style. By the time the decision must be made, try to make sure you're both on the same page as to which qualities matter for promotion decisions and that you've clearly articulated how your candidate exemplifies those qualities.

The catch: No matter how much of a champion the other person becomes, don't expect them to agree with a decision that's fundamentally illogical. You can't rely on relationship alone; your stance still needs to be backed by clear logic. Additionally, these types of detractors can easily sense if you're trying to manipulate the situation to get them on your side. **Authenticity is key:** allow the other person to see who you are so that they can more fully understand your point of view.

The Credible Colleague Approach

When to use it: There are times when the detractor's deeply-held personal beliefs make them fundamentally opposed to your proposal. Take, for example, a colleague who might disagree with you on the need to run a necessary clinical trial for a new product. Because they believe that the clinical trial might be harmful in some way or run counter to their values, they oppose the idea, even though the evidence shows that the benefits outweigh the harm. It's sometimes tough to pinpoint where these personal beliefs stem from, but some combination of the person's upbringing, personal history, and unspoken biases will, at times, make it seemingly impossible for them to accept a decision, no matter what logical or emotional argument you throw their way. **In these situations, there isn't much you can say or do to change their mind.**

How it works: Rather than trying to argue with someone who seems resistant, bring in a credible colleague. **A champion of your position from another part of the organization, whether they are a peer or superior, may be better-suited to convince this detractor.** This forces the detractor to disentangle who you are from what your

argument might be and evaluate the idea based on its objective merits. If you and the detractor are at an impasse, the credible colleague might just tip the scales in your favor.

The catch: Calling in an external supporter is a double-edged sword. While it can achieve the outcome you want, it may exacerbate your detractor's opposition, especially if the detractor feels that the credible colleague has forced them to take your side. It's critical to find the right colleague who can tactfully advocate for your position while maintaining a cordial relationship.

It's not easy to have detractors, and it's even harder to change their minds. The key is to understand the source of their resistance and use a targeted strategy that best resonates with your particular detractor. You'll have a much better chance of getting a "yes."



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