Chapter 12
Turning Persuasion from an Art into a Science

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What is the place of the persuasion process in the topic of clashes of knowledge? The outcome of such clashes is often determined not so much by the features of the knowledge itself as by the features of the way the knowledge is presented. Having a good case to make is not enough. It is the side that makes its good case well (i.e., most persuasively) that will frequently win the day. The focus of this chapter, then, will be on methods for communicating one's case in the most effective manner so as to prevail in clashes of knowledge.

The Roots of Persuasion Studies

Dangerous Fruit

First, a brief step into the past is in order. The renowned scholar of social influence, William McGuire, determined that in the four millennia of recorded Western history, there have been only four scattered centuries in which the study of persuasion flourished as a craft. The first was the Periclean Age of ancient Athens; the second occurred during the years of the Roman Republic; the next appeared in the time of the European Renaissance; and the last extended over the 100 years that have just ended and that witnessed the advent of large-scale advertising, information, and mass-media campaigns (McGuire, 1985). Although this bit of background seems benign, it possesses an alarming side: Each of the three previous centuries in the systematic study of persuasion ended similarly when political authorities had the masters of persuasion killed.

A moment’s reflection suggests why this pattern occurred. Information about the persuasion process was dangerous because it created a base of power entirely separate from that which the authorities of the times controlled. Persuasion is a way to move people that does not require coercion, intimidation, or brute strength. Persuaders win the day by marshalling forces that heads of state have no monopoly over, such as cleverly crafted language, properly placed information, and, most important, psychological insight. To eliminate this rival source of influence, it was easiest for
the rulers to eliminate those few individuals who truly understood how to engage in the process.

Consequently, each of the three earlier centuries in the systematic study of persuasion ended in the same unsettling manner—with a purge of the reigning persuasion experts. It has not been long since the completion of the fourth such century. Therefore, should those who study and master the material contained in this chapter begin looking for cover out of fear that they might be included in an impending fourth day of annihilation? Not this time.

The Flowering of Science

Something revolutionary has happened to the study of persuasion during the past half century. In the bargain, the change has rendered implausible the idea that persuasion expertise could be eradicated by eradicating the persuasion experts. Alongside the art of persuasion has grown a formidable science of the process. For over 50 years, researchers have been applying a rigorous scientific approach to the question of which messages most successfully lead people to concede, comply, or change. Under controlled conditions, they have documented the sometimes astonishing impact of making a request in one fashion versus making the identical request in a slightly different fashion. Besides the sheer size of the effects these researchers have uncovered, there is another noteworthy aspect of their results—they are repeatable.

Scientists have long employed a set of systematic procedures for discovering and replicating findings, including persuasion findings. As a consequence, the study of persuasion no longer exists only as an ethereal art. It is now a science, a solid science, that can produce the same result time and again. What is more, whoever engages in the scientific process can duplicate the result. Brilliant, inspired individuals are no longer necessary to uncover the truth about persuasion. The power of discovery does not reside inside the minds of a few persuasive geniuses anymore but inside the scientific process. Therefore, knowledge about persuasion cannot be eliminated by eliminating the people who possess it—because somebody else can come along, use the same scientific procedures, and get the knowledge back again. So, anyone interested in becoming expert in the ways of persuasion is safe from threatened power holders, who should now be more interested in acquiring the information than abolishing it.

But, students of persuasion have a right to feel more than just relieved. They are entitled to feel encouraged by the fact that similar procedures can produce the same persuasion results over and over. If such replicability is indeed the case, it means that persuasion is governed by natural laws. The upshot offers a distinct advantage to anyone wishing to employ persuasion effectively. If persuasion is lawful, it is learnable. Whether born with an inspired talent for influence or not, whether preternaturally insightful about the process or not, whether a gifted artisan of the language or not, a person can learn how to be more influential. By applying a small