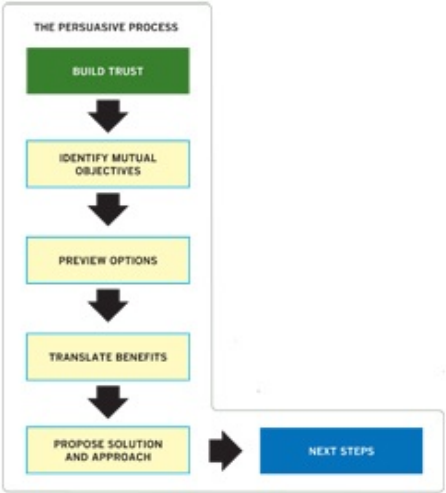
Communicating Technical Ideas Persuasively

Got a good technical idea? You're halfway there. In the competitive marketplace of ideas, it takes more than innovative thinking to succeed. You must also be able to persuade others that your ideas are worthy of their attention, acceptance, or investment.

There are many competent engineers who can generate sound technical solutions. But few of them have mastered the art of persuasion. It can make the difference between a successful project and thwarted plans. Fortunately, good persuasive skills can be learned. You should recognize, however, that the conventions of communicating technical information in our profession tend to inhibit the persuasive process.



The Dynamics of Persuasion
What is persuasion? It is communication that seeks to elicit a specific, voluntary response from another. The key word is "voluntary." Persuasion is not compelling or manipulating others to do what you want. You must present your audience with a legitimate choice of options. True persuasion occurs when someone not only chooses your preferred option but feels good about it afterwards.

There are two dimensions of persuasion: position and conviction. Position involves *intellectual agreement*. For example, you convince the facility manager that the HVAC system is undersized and needs replacement. But then the work is never ordered. Why? Because while the manager agreed with you intellectually, he didn't feel strongly enough about the problem to spend the time and money to correct it. You failed to evoke his conviction, which is the *motivation to act*.

Effective communicators recognize that conviction (emotional response) is more vital to persuasion than position (intellectual response). People make decisions based primarily on what they feel and then test or rationalize their choice with logic. Engineers often struggle with being persuasive because, being trained in a fact-based profession, they assume that agreement based on technical arguments is sufficient to get others to act. But logic doesn't drive decision making; it merely supports it. Persuasion must first engage the emotions.

The Persuasive Process
Persuasion, like any human interaction, can hardly be prescribed in a step-by-step process. But there is a general progression of activities that typically accompany effective persuasion:

Build a foundation of trust. You cannot persuade someone who doesn't trust you. I've witnessed many scenarios in which well-meaning engineers rolled out their best arguments and data trying to convince an audience that didn't trust their intentions. Persuasion relies mostly on influence, not information. And influence is rooted in an environment of trust. How can you build trust quickly with your audience?

Demonstrate you care. The old axiom is true: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Trust requires genuine concern, not the kind of feigned interest we often associate with salespeople.

Demonstrate you understand. People are more likely to trust someone who can identify with their situation, their needs, and their interests. That's why persuasion should start with asking questions and listening carefully to the responses.

Demonstrate perspective. You are more likely to gain people's trust if they believe you have investigated and weighed different options. Too often we seek to persuade others from a very narrow point of view ("my way or nothing"). This engenders distrust.

Establish common ground. Advance the persuasive process by reviewing the areas of agreement you hold with your audience. This helps build momentum before you begin discussing any differences. When efforts to reach agreement on some point have stalled, it's often effective to return to what you agree upon and try a different path towards consensus.

Preview viable alternatives. One of the best ways to persuade others is to guide them through an evaluation of various options. A take-it-or-leave-it option (with possible modest refinements) usually stifles persuasion. Yet that is often how engineering projects proceed. The evaluation of alternatives is done behind the scenes, with the audience often excluded from the thought process that led to selecting the preferred option. When people feel excluded from this process, they are less likely to be receptive to your ideas. So share both your conclusions and your thought process.

Translate technical features into human benefits. Every affected party in a technically-related decision wants to know, "What's in it for me?" Engineers often neglect connecting their technical solutions to the associated positive human outcomes. Don't just stick to objective, quantitative analyses of alternatives; examine how people will be impacted.

Propose the favored solution. Engineering solutions are communicated before they are constructed. Most engineers are not great communicators and probably underestimate how much that shortcoming limits their success as engineers. Becoming a better persuasive communicator is a complicated endeavor, but the following tips will help you get started:

Target a few key messages. Determine the three to five main points that must be communicated in order to make your case. In writing, make sure your key messages are evident even at the skim level. In oral presentations, build your content around your key messages.

Use personal language. Engineers are prone to depersonalize technical communication, especially in writing. Don't. Did you know that several studies have concluded that "you" is the most persuasive word in the English language? Avoid "technicalese"; instead, write in a conversational tone.

Let your passion show. People are more persuaded by the depth of your conviction than the facts supporting it. Why should your audience care if it's not apparent that you do? When you show sincere interest in your topic, others are more likely to be won over as well. Don't be afraid to communicate your enthusiasm; it's contagious.

FROM: Lester, M., (November, 2009). Leading insight: Communicating technical ideas persuasively. ***PE: The Magazine for Professional Engineers***, pp. 12, 13.