

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PERSUASION & MANIPULATION

The difference between persuasion and manipulation has been a subject of debate for literally thousands of years. In ancient Greece during the 4th century BC the father of persuasion, Aristotle, opposed a group of teachers known as the Sophists. The Sophists provided instruction in various disciplines, but became infamous for their teaching of rhetoric. Aristotle clashed with the Sophists over the fact that they did not care about truth, but would promote any idea for a fee. Aristotle asserted that the Sophists were engaging in manipulation because they intentionally deceived people and caused harm.¹

Today, the debate between persuasion and manipulation rages on. In fact, many confess that they have a hard time distinguishing between the two. Yet, understanding the distinction is vital because it will guide you in influencing others ethically and equip you with the knowledge to recognize manipulative messages.

Why Persuasion Is Good

To accurately discern the difference between persuasion and manipulation it is essential to understand the ethics that undergird persuasion. There are some communication theorists who have declared that persuasion is “ethically neutral.”² That is to say that persuasion is neither good nor bad, but merely an impartial process. However, I do not accept this position. I would contend that the Aristotelian viewpoint that persuasion is not neutral, but noble, is correct. Aristotle stressed that persuasion is inherently good because it is one of the primary means through which truth becomes known.³ Through the persuasive method an idea is put forth with evidence and a person is allowed to freely choose to either accept or reject that persuasive appeal. Jay Conger wrote about this in the *Harvard Business Review*, when he affirmed, “Persuasion does indeed involve moving people to a position they don’t currently hold, but not by begging or cajoling. Instead, it involves careful preparation, the proper framing of arguments, the presentation of vivid supporting evidence, and the effort to find the correct emotional match with your audience.”⁴

The belief that persuasion is an honorable and effective means of arriving at truth is seen by the fact that it is the basis for modern economics, counseling practices and the legal system. In addition, persuasion is also the foundation of democracy. As Professor Raymond Ross writes, “Democracies use thoughtful ethical persuasion whenever they elect leaders, establish laws, or try to protect their citizens.”⁵ Even those who become dismayed with the notion of persuasion cannot escape it. Persuasion is ingrained within human communication. When communicating, people both intentionally and unintentionally promote certain beliefs and behaviors. Consequently, persuasion is not a matter of choice; it is inherent in social interaction. In fact, it is so pervasive in human communication that at times it becomes almost invisible. Dr. Herbert W. Simons, Professor at Temple University illustrates this when he writes, “The so-called people professions – politics, law, social work, counseling, business management, advertising, sales, public relations, the ministry – might as well be called persuasion professions.”⁶

At its core, persuasion is the pursuit of truth. It is through persuasion that positive change occurs. For example, persuasive messages have been scientifically proven to prompt high school students to refrain from smoking,⁷ increase lifesaving blood donations,⁸ and prevent youth from joining gangs.⁹ Communication scholars Gass and Seiter echo this idea when they assert, “Persuasion helps forge peace agreements between nations. Persuasion helps open up closed societies. Persuasion is crucial to the fund-raising efforts of charities and philanthropic organizations. Persuasion convinces motorists to buckle up when driving or to refrain from driving when they’ve had a few too many drinks. Persuasion is used to convince an alcoholic or drug-dependent family member to seek professional help. Persuasion is how the coach of an underdog team inspires the players to give it their all. Persuasion is a tool used by parents to urge children not to accept rides from strangers or to allow anyone to touch them in a way that feels uncomfortable. In short, persuasion is the cornerstone of a number of positive, prosocial endeavors. Very little of the good that we see in the world could be accomplished without persuasion.”¹⁰

Though, the goodness of persuasion and the fact that it is embedded within human nature is not what causes people concern. What causes anxiety is the corruption of persuasion. To be sure, when persuasion is distorted, it can become manipulative, which is dangerous. Through manipulation, con artists, cult leaders and dictators have abused, enslaved, and even massacred millions. However, as detrimental as manipulation is, it should never be confused with persuasion. Manipulation is the perversion of persuasion. It is not concerned with truth, but rather deceit. Aristotle commented on this in his acclaimed work, *Rhetoric* when he emphasized, “an abuse of the rhetorical faculty can work great mischief, the same charge can be brought against all good things save virtue itself, and especially against the most useful things such as strength, health, wealth, and military skill. Rightly employed, they work the greatest blessing; and wrongly employed, they work the greatest harm.”¹¹

Consequently, the pertinent question is how can you distinguish between persuasion and manipulation? The following are the three straightforward, yet reliable ways that you can analyze if a message is manipulative.

1. Intention

Intention is a primary factor in judging whether a request is manipulative. If a person attempts to present an idea or behavior that is not in the best interest of another, they are engaging in manipulation. Sadly, this is all too common. People frequently fall into the trap of abusing others in the pursuit of what they desire. One of the root causes of this Machiavellian perspective is not viewing others with equality. The renowned philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote about this mindset when he suggested that the foundational precept of morality is treating a person as a human being and not as a thing.

2. Withholding Truth

Manipulation involves distorting or withholding truth. Often, this is seen through exaggerating the advantages of a behavior, idea or product. It was this form of manipulation that prompted the phrase

Caveat Emptor, which is Latin for “Buyer Beware,” to become prevalent. The phrase was particularly widespread during those historical periods when there was little accountability for sellers. The saying was a warning to potential buyers to be leery of those selling goods, and to make sure that they verified, before making a purchase, that the quality of the product was identical to the claims made by the seller. Even today most people have experienced being told about the features or benefits of a product or service and then after purchasing it realized that they had been misled. This is wrong, as anything other than honest representation is blatant manipulation.

3. Coercion

Coercion is the third and most obvious component of a manipulative appeal. It is the removal of free choice, the ultimatum - do it or else. In contrast, persuasion involves influence, but never force. As communication scholar Dr. Richard Perloff writes, “a defining characteristic of persuasion is free choice. At some level the individual must be capable of accepting or rejecting the position that has been urged of him or her.”¹² Therefore, an invitation that one is unable to say no to is not persuasive in nature, but is coercive and accordingly manipulative.

Summary

In summary, there is a vast difference between persuasion and manipulation. Persuasion advances the position of all involved. It is a prosocial endeavor that guides the receiver of a message in accepting truth. In contrast, a manipulative appeal is one that if adopted will negatively impact another. Manipulation is morally wrong and ultimately counterproductive to the interests of all involved. As social psychologist Robert Cialdini stated, “The systematic use of misleading influence tactics... ultimately becomes a psychologically and financially self-damaging process.”¹³ Therefore, through an accurate and robust understanding of both the rightness of persuasion and the three primary elements of manipulation you will be better able to persuade others ethically and protect yourself from manipulative requests.

About the Author

David Hoffeld is CEO of the Hoffeld Group, a research based sales training, coaching and consulting firm that is the leader in the integration of proven science and sales. The Hoffeld Group takes the repeatable and predictable principles, which science has proven to create and enable influence, out of the laboratory and academic journals and apply them to selling. For a deeper look at the Hoffeld Group's groundbreaking research and innovative sales strategies visit HoffeldGroup.com.

Notes

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