



# the art of **INFLUENCE & PERSUASION**

By Deborah Mackin

**P**eople influence each other every day, whether we do it intentionally or not. Every interaction, every conversation, every exchange of ideas has an effect on others and presents for us an influencing opportunity. Some people are good at it; others never quite understand why they “miss the boat.” In this article, we will look at important concepts in the art of influence and persuasion that are critical for every leader to know.

Many of us don't know how and when we are influencing others, whether from a positive or negative perspective. Few of us realize that we have about four to seven seconds to make a positive impact and good opening impression. We aren't aware that the average attention span of the typical listener is only six to eight minutes and that the average person can only remember clusters of three to four concepts at a time.

Lessons from history show that the ability to influence others is key to leadership. Leaders must demonstrate the capacity to “shape” others' behavior to impact the thinking and action of others. Yet by observing famous leaders such as Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Winston Churchill, Aung San Suukyi, we see that there is no one influencing style that every leader must adopt. In fact, leaders demonstrate countless different styles. So style is not the determining factor.

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Before we examine what are the determining factors, let's clarify some important definitions:

**Influence:** Any time a source deliberately attempts to change a receiver's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. Inducing a change in **behavior** is called compliance. Inducing a change in **attitude** is called persuasion. Inducing a

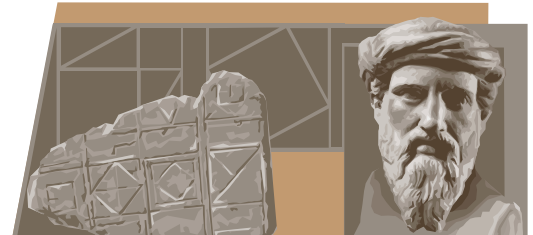
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change in **belief** is called either education or propaganda — depending on your perspective.

**Persuasion:** Deliberately seeks **attitude** change through communication. It tries to win the “heart and mind” of the individual and involves an emotion-based (affection) change.

The ancient Greeks had a very grounded approach toward persuasion. A Greek citizen would hire a Sophist to help him learn to argue. (Sophists were itinerant lecturers and writers devoted to knowledge.)

The Sophists argued that persuasion was a useful tool to discover the truth. They thought the process of arguing and debating would expose bad ideas and allow the good ones to be revealed. A Sophist didn't particularly care which side of the issues he was arguing. In fact, sometimes a Sophist would switch sides in the middle of the debate.



In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle distinguished three factors influencing communication:

- ① **Ethos**, involving characteristics of the speaker that enhance the persuasive impact of the speech;
- ② **Pathos**, the emotional reactions in the audience which aid or inhibit the impact of the speech;
- ③ **Logos**, the argument's logic with the message itself. Put into today's language we might call it — heart, smarts, and sparkle.

Besides Aristotle's three factors, there are two other important internal drivers in people that affect their willingness to be influenced: a) whether it meets their inner needs and wants, and b) whether it helps them avoid their inner fears or concerns. People will accept the influence of others when it is consistent with their goals and desires, and they will resist the influence of others when it is likely to lead to an outcome they don't desire.

## Two Modes of Thinking: Systematic and Heuristic

As experts looked at persuasion, they identified two distinct modes of thinking that people use when receiving information. One is a **systematic** mode, where people carefully think through the logic of what is being said and the other is the **heuristic** mode, where people skim the surface of what is being said. If a person is using the systematic approach, facts, evidence, examples, reasoning and logic are more

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attractive. These are called “arguments.” However, if someone is using heuristic thinking, they desire easily processed information, attractiveness, friendliness and reliance on expert sources rather than do their own thinking. These elements are called “cues.” As experts examined these two modes, they made some interesting observations:

- Situations and personality differences affect which mode of thinking a person will use. We are flexible and will move back and forth between the two modes.
- Influence achieved through the systematic approach is more persistent over time, more resistant to change, and more predictive of behavior than influence from the heuristic mode.
- In the immediate, short-term situation, the magnitude or amount of influence is the same regardless of whether the systematic or heuristic mode is used.
- Most people most of the time are in the **heuristic mode** of thinking.
- Once we establish the correct mode the person is in, we can provide the correct influencing agents.

## Developing an Influencing Strategy



Based on these insights, we can now develop an effective influencing strategy. Our first step is to **identify the mental state of the person we are trying to influence**. If the individual is in the systematic mode, we will see attentiveness, alertness and thoughtfulness regarding the information we are sharing. If the individual is in the heuristic mode, we will see distraction, lazy thinking, and boredom. If we ask questions, the systematic thinker will provide thoughtful, reasonable responses; the heuristic thinker will not understand the question or provide uninspired or off the wall answers.

The second step is to **match the right influence tool** (arguments or cues) **with the correct mental state** (systematic or heuristic). If we are in doubt, it is best to choose the heuristic mode, as more than 70 percent of people are in the heuristic mode most of the time. Based on selecting the right tools, our next step is to develop arguments from the point of view of the receiver. Most of us tend to offer arguments that are compelling and powerful to us and assume that others will respond the same way. This is a mistake. Once we have chosen our course, let's look at how to appeal to each type of thinker.

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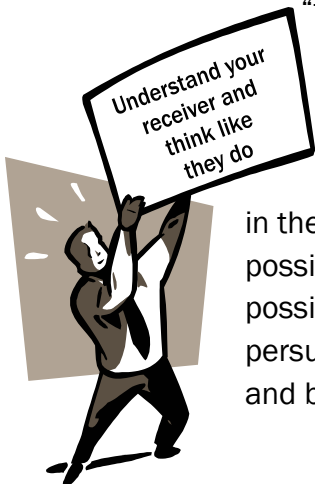
## Systematic Thinkers

To influence the systematic thinkers, there are three keys to being effective:

❶ **Make the issue relevant to the receiver.** When people believe the situation is personally important to them, they are more likely to think about it systematically. If the situation holds little relevance, they will stay in the heuristic mode. We must identify the “WIIFM” (What’s In It For Me).

❷ **Careful, logical sequencing of information.** When a person presents information that is complex, dense, or esoteric, the receiver has to work too hard to understand. Because we are basically lazy thinkers, we will drop back into heuristic mode rather than try to process the information. Presenting to a systematic thinker requires a careful, logical sequence of arguments that makes sense to the receiver.

❸ **Framing the arguments.** Systematic thinkers need to have arguments “framed” in order to keep the focus contained. Without the frame, the arguments can become wide-ranging and diffuse, causing the systematic thinker to shift back to a heuristic thinker. Framing forces the listener to consider only certain data and facts and ignore others. You must ask: what is of central importance to the receiver? What should be included in the frame and what should be excluded? Framing a decision in terms of a possible loss will motivate more than framing the same decision in terms of possible gain. Negative information overwhelms positive information in persuasion. To produce good framing, you must understand your receivers and be able to think the way they do.



## Heuristic Thinkers

To influence heuristic thinkers, it helps to consider this quote from James Stiff, “*The quality of an argument is largely irrelevant to humans. We are influenced by the argument’s claim or conclusion and how closely it matches our prejudices.*” To motivate a heuristic thinker, we need to use “cues” or shortcuts — things that will influence but require minimal thinking. Keep in mind that heuristic thinkers like easily-processed information, attractive packaging, friendliness, reliance on expert sources, visuals, previous knowledge and associations. These are the cues that most appeal to heuristic thinkers:

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**Comparison.** Heuristic thinkers use the behavior of other people to guide what they think or do. We desire to be like other people. When others are doing something, we want to, too.

**Likeability.** When we like the source, we will do what is requested. Physically attractive people are very influential to heuristic thinkers because we like attractive people.

**Authority.** When a source is an authority, the person will believe it. We respond to authority without thinking. Years ago, Robert Young, the actor who played Marcus Welby, MD on TV, tried to sell aspirin until federal authorities cracked down. Now it is illegal to use actors unless they say, “I am no doctor, but here’s what I would recommend.”

**Reciprocity.** The source gives something to the receiver. Once the receiver accepts it, they are now obligated to give something back.

**Commitment and Consistency.** We like consistency. When we make a commitment, we will hold onto that stand in order to maintain consistency. To change will cause dissonance, which we don’t like.

**Scarcity.** When it is rare, it is perceived as good. Time, resources, and information can all be used to push the “scarcity” button.

## Five Stages of Persuasion

As you look at the five stages of persuasion below, consider whether you are dealing with a systematic or heuristic thinker. Then modify your approach at each stage.



**① Attention:** Did it grab the person’s attention? Are they interested? With the systematic thinker, use a provocative piece of data or a challenging relevant question. With the heuristic thinker, tell a story or show a picture.

**② Comprehension:** Do they understand the context? With the systematic thinker, build your logical argument step-by-step being careful to frame it from the perspective of the receiver. With the heuristic thinker, use “cues” like comparison and authority.

**③ Acceptance:** Do they agree and accept what is being said and make it part of their belief system? For the systematic thinker, they will need to engage in arguing

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and processing the information until it becomes their own. For the heuristic thinker, they need to know who else accepts the information and whether you are likeable.

**4 Retention: Do they remember it afterwards?** The systematic thinker will retain the information; the heuristic thinker will not. They will need continuing reinforcement of the information.

**5 Action: Does it get them to do something?** The systematic thinker, if they have bought into the argument, will most likely commit to action; the heuristic thinker will commit to action if it provides a benefit to them personally.

The next time you turn on the TV, watch the ads for products and try to determine what methods are being used to persuade and influence you to purchase the product. Marketers have mastered the realization that most of us are heuristic thinkers. Now think about the next presentation you are planning to give or argument you plan to present at a meeting. What was the approach you planned to use? What will your approach be now that you look at your audience as either systematic or heuristic thinkers?