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Winning the Argument

**The only way to get the best of an
argument is to avoid it.**

Dale Carnegie

Some lessons you learn the hard way. And, boy, did I learn the power of an unbeatable argument the hard way.

I was 25 years old and working for my first employer, a large American management consultancy. One day I happened to read an article in the *Financial Times* written by someone I'll call Geoff, the chairman of a small British firm of business psychologists. I thought the article – about the ways in which egotistical leaders could plunge their companies into chaos – was so stunningly insightful that I immediately wanted to work for this smaller firm.

I did what research I could on Geoff and his business and wrote a speculative letter to him. Less than a fortnight later, I was delighted to be offered an interview with one of the directors who reported to him. There were further rounds of interviews as well as a grueling day-long assessment centre, but, cutting a long story short, I was finally invited to meet Geoff one-on-one.

I realized that he was going to offer me a job. And so on a crisp autumn morning, I walked into that meeting ready to argue my case and negotiate a big salary increase to what I was currently earning.

But Geoff was clever, oh so clever. Wearing an open, sincere expression, he talked about the opportunities at the firm. He pointed his

finger at me and told me how he could see me rising up the ranks because he could sense that I was the kind of star that the firm needed. He said that he was so certain I'd do well that it would be inevitable that they'd be raising my salary within six months and then again after a year.

We eventually reached a deal, and it wasn't until after I'd left the meeting that I realized I'd completely failed in my objectives. Even though I had been prepared to argue my case, Geoff somehow flattered and inspired me so much that I agreed to take the job for exactly the same salary as I was already on!

I was later told by a recruitment expert that I could reasonably have expected a 20 to 30 per cent pay rise. But no, I got nothing. Nada. Zip.

Geoff had totally won me over. He had won the argument.

The skill of winning an argument is universally useful. Who doesn't want to be more influential, more persuasive? The skill is as applicable if you're trying to win over a colleague, client or investor as endeavouring to persuade a friend to give up smoking or a loved one to do more housework. So what is it that makes certain hotshots so successful at negotiating deals, changing minds and winning arguments?

Who doesn't want to be more influential, more persuasive?

Winning arguments without arguing

When it comes to winning arguments, there's both good news and bad.

Let me start with the bad news first: you can't win arguments.

Huh?

Allow me to explain by presenting a dictionary definition of an argument:

Argument (noun).

1. A heated or undignified exchange of conflicting views.
2. A statement, fact, reason or set of reasons given in support of something.

ORIGIN from Latin: *argumentum*, from the verb *arguere* meaning “make clear, prove”.

In everyday speech, we customarily use the word “argument” to refer to the first meaning, the heated exchange of conflicting views, when we talk loudly or even shout or scream at each other. And in this situation, we can never truly win.

Think back to the last time you were in such an argument. It may have been over something at work, like how best to tackle a project or where to go for the annual team dinner. Perhaps it was over something at home – whether you’re each doing enough of the housework or whose fault it was that the electricity bill didn’t get paid. It may have been a quarrel over something either relatively trivial or monumentally important. But how did you feel? And how do you think the other person felt?

Sure, you may have been able to get the other person or persons to do what you wanted (or maybe they were the ones who won by getting you to do what they wanted). But there were probably raised voices. Perhaps you both talked over each other. Maybe one or both of you said something a little hurtful.

All of that can cause bruised feelings. At best, you may have won grudging compliance with what you wanted rather than gaining wholehearted agreement as to the merits of what you were proposing. And that, to me, isn't truly winning an argument. When one party feels resentful or even a little bitter, it damages the relationship.

So we must, wherever possible, avoid those angry clashes – the blurted-out words, the indignant tone of voice and the turmoil of emotions overwhelming our more sensible selves.

Instead, we must focus on the second definition of the word: on presenting facts and reasons to secure agreement.

I said earlier that there's both bad news and good about winning arguments. And it's true that we can't ever genuinely win arguments that are furious clashes – the “heated or undignified exchange of conflicting views”, which is the first definition of the word “argument”.

But then there's the good news. We *can* win people over by focusing on the second definition of the word, by presenting “a statement, fact, reason or set of reasons” in an altogether quieter and less animated fashion.

We can't ever genuinely win arguments that are furious clashes.

What's your style of arguing?

Before we move on, can I suggest a little diagnostic test to see how you tend to approach discussions and disagreements, please?

Read the statements below and respond by ticking the box with the number that corresponds to your behaviour. The best way to rate yourself is to go through the statements fairly quickly. This is for your own benefit, so be as honest with yourself as you can.

HOW TO WIN

	1: almost never	2: not often	3: some- times	4: fairly often	5: very often
1. I am able to say "no" to unreasonable requests.					
2. I look for ways to be helpful to the people I work with.					
3. I feel good about my ability to cope with the unexpected.					
4. I respect the rights of others because I expect others to respect my rights.					
5. I have a good (positive) opinion of myself.					
6. I work well with others and get along with others in groups.					
7. I make up my own mind easily without asking others what they think I should do.					

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	1: almost never	2: not often	3: some- times	4: fairly often	5: very often
8. Complimenting the people I'm around comes easily and naturally to me.					
9. I can be very focused or very relaxed whenever I want to be.					
10. I make plans, set goals and try to prepare myself for the future.					
11. I am aware of my feelings and express them in constructive ways.					
12. When someone is explaining something, I try to pay close attention.					
13. I expect to get what I pay for in the marketplace, and I am not easily taken advantage of.					

(Continued)

HOW TO WIN

	1: almost never	2: not often	3: some- times	4: fairly often	5: very often
14. I get started on my regular job or work assignment without needing to be told or reminded.					
15. I feel relaxed and comfortable in social situations.					
16. During meetings or group discussions, I speak up and add my feelings and thoughts on the subject.					
17. I take reasonable risks to achieve my goals.					
18. I say what I think and feel about things. I express my opinion freely.					
19. I am direct and get right to the point.					
20. I feel comfortable with people who are quite different from me in race, background or lifestyle.					

The questionnaire gives us two distinct measures of how we may deal with different interpersonal situations.

To calculate your overall *Respect For Others* score, add up the individual scores you gave to yourself on the even numbered statements 2 through 14 (i.e. 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12 and 14). This should give you a total Respect For Others score of between 7 and 35.

To calculate your total *Assertion* score, add up the scores you gave yourself to all of the odd numbered statements 1 through 15 (i.e. 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13 and 15). And add to that the scores you gave yourself to questions 16 through to 20 as well. This should give you a total Assertion score of between 14 and 70.

If you like, you can write your scores in here:

Respect For Others =
Assertion =

The questionnaire was developed by University of Arkansas scholars Ed Williams and Robert Akridge. The fact that it was developed by academics means that the test is rigorous and robust (i.e. it provides us with quite a lot of insight into how adults tend to behave in vexing interpersonal situations).¹

Once we know how you currently tend to go about influencing people, we can look at the right strategies to help you to get better at it.

Of course, once we know how you currently tend to go about influencing people, we can look at the right strategies to help you to get better at it. To gauge how you stack up against other folks, take a look at the tables below.

HOW TO WIN

Your Respect For Others score	Implication
35	When dealing with others, you show a great deal of respect for others – more so than 95 per cent of people
33	You show a good deal of respect – more than 75 per cent of people
31	You show average levels of consideration for others – 50 per cent of people are more respectful than you but 50 per cent are less respectful
29	You could show more levels of consideration for others – 75 per cent of people show <i>more</i> respect for others than you do
27	You could show considerably more respect for others – 85 per cent of people tend to show <i>more</i> respect for others than you do

Your Assertion score	Implication
62	When dealing with others, you assert yourself exceedingly strongly – more so than 95 per cent of people
57	You assert yourself quite strongly – more than 75 per cent of people
52	You show average levels of assertion – 50 per cent of people are more assertive than you but 50 per cent are less assertive
48	You could be more assertive – 75 per cent of people are <i>more</i> assertive than you
44	You could be quite a lot more assertive – 85 per cent of people are <i>more</i> assertive than you

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Once you have both of your scores, you can plot your influencing style using the grid below. If you scored 33 or above on Respect For Others, that's a high score. A score of around 31 is average. A score of 29 or lower would be considered low.

In terms of Assertion, a score of 57 or above is high. Around 52 is average. And 48 or lower would be considered low.

For instance, an individual scoring 28 on Respect For Others and 63 on Assertion would be classified as demonstrating mainly Forceful Persuasion. Someone else scoring 31 on Respect For Others and 47 on Assertion would be somewhere between Passivity and Helpfulness.

So what's your current style for convincing and cajoling people?

Assertion	<i>High</i>	Forceful Persuasion	Responsible Assertiveness
	<i>Low</i>	Passivity	Helpfulness
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>

Respect For Others

Understanding what your interpersonal style says about you

I like to think of effective influencing as about both give and take in equal measure. Respect For Others is about giving – giving other people the chance to express their views, for example. On the other

hand, Assertion is about taking – swooping in on opportunities in situations and asserting our rights to take from those situations what we desire.

Ideally, we want to score highly on both Respect For Others and Assertion. But as you can see from the grid above, it's possible to be high on Respect For Others but low on Assertion (which results in the Helpfulness style of influencing) or high on Assertion but low on Respect For Others (which results in the Forceful Persuasion style). The fourth combination is to be low on both Respect and Assertion, which results in Passivity.

Here's a brief guide to how people who display each of the four influencing styles tend to behave and be perceived by others.

Helpfulness

Helpfulness is the trademark of people who are high on Respect For Others but low on Assertion. As you can no doubt guess, individuals who have the Helpfulness style are great team players. They are often courteous, likeable and friendly. They tend to be good listeners and have wonderful empathy for the problems and issues facing others.

The fact that individuals with this style have a high level of Respect For Others is a fantastic strength, but the fact that it's coupled with low Assertion can mean that others may take advantage of them. Researchers at Columbia University have coined a phrase to describe such individuals: they could be perceived as “instrumentally impotent” (i.e. less able to achieve their own goals).²

A buddy of mine, I'll call Arun, definitely tends towards Helpfulness. A slim Indian guy with a tendency to drop eye contact when he speaks, he's a software engineer who is always busy because his colleagues are constantly asking him for help with their projects.

He has been told repeatedly that he knows more about his field of expertise than most of his colleagues and even many of the managers in his department. But he has seen others being promoted above him because he doesn't put himself forward. He believes in talking only when he has something to say and his voice is repeatedly drowned out by some of his louder, more aggressive colleagues.

Arun comes across as agreeable and friendly, which are of course good traits. At the same time, though, he is perhaps too deferential. The fact that he rarely speaks up is sadly interpreted as meaning that he doesn't have anything to contribute.

He would like to advance in his career but he doesn't do a very good job of telling his bosses what he wants and why he should get it. Arguably, his biggest problem is that he doesn't say "no" frequently enough to the more trivial requests that are made of him, which means that he doesn't have the time to pursue the greater opportunities that could help him to vault up the career ladder.

Is your main influencing style Helpfulness?

Forceful Persuasion

People who are high on Assertion but lower on Respect For Others can be said to utilize the Forceful Persuasion interpersonal style. These individuals tend to be good at speaking their minds, stating their case and telling others what they want. They often get it too – at least in the short term.

They tend to see themselves as being direct and uncompromising – they don't pull punches. However, others may find them a little too pushy, sometimes abrasive or even aggressive, which may damage longer-term relationships. The same crew at Columbia University describe such individuals as "socially insufferable".

A client of mine, let's call her Tatiana, used to be known for her Forceful Persuasion style. The managing partner of a tax advisory firm, with blue-grey eyes and long, straight blonde hair falling down her back, she had been encouraged by her colleagues to seek coaching on her leadership style. When she got in touch with me, I began by interviewing some of her team to find out what they thought her strengths and weaknesses were. They described her as someone who was fiercely determined. Once she set her mind on something, she rarely gave in until she got her way. Her colleagues always knew where they stood with her too: she never shied away from condemning the faults with a project or a colleague's work.

While they admired Tatiana's strengths, they also pointed out that she could at times be quite inflexible or even intimidating. They felt that she didn't seem to listen to or value others' opinions, for instance on a couple of occasions she seemed to listen only to disregard totally what she heard. They also said that, while she was quick to point out faults, flaws and mistakes, she rarely praised good work or thanked people for their efforts.

Thankfully, Tatiana was willing to work on her interpersonal style in order to lift her effectiveness as a leader. Over the course of less than a year, she made considerable strides in improving her empathy and listening skills. She got much better at complimenting and acknowledging people's efforts and finding more sensitive ways to phrase her criticisms.

Passivity

People who are low on both Assertion and Respect For Others may end up with the Passivity interpersonal style. Their lower Assertion means that they feel less comfortable speaking up and asking for what they want – even if their goals are perfectly reasonable. But at the same time, their inability to show greater Respect means that

they can be ignored by those around them. Individuals who have the Passivity style often feel a little isolated or frustrated that they aren't taken more seriously by others.

I was once recruited to coach a lawyer who exhibited the Passivity style. With the constantly furrowed brow of a deep thinker, Jarrod was a highly competent technical specialist: he had a magnificent amount of knowledge about the specifics of real-estate law. However, his colleagues complained that he seemed to be in his own private world. They said that he didn't really tell them what he was working on – it often seemed as if he was working on projects that interested him rather than assignments that would be of the most use to the wider firm. Neither did he respond promptly enough to his colleagues' requests for assistance. In other words, people felt that he wasn't enough of a team player.

When I first met Jarrod, he explained that he frequently felt thwarted by his own inability to speak up. Even when he did speak up, he tended to do so indirectly by hinting and alluding to issues rather than broaching them unambiguously. As a result, his ideas and suggestions rarely got taken on board by his colleagues.

He knew *what* he wanted to achieve in terms of being taken more seriously. He longed to develop his gravitas and personal impact so that he could have a greater say in how the team operated. However, he couldn't initially see *how* he could achieve it.

Responsible Assertiveness

People who influence using the Responsible Assertiveness style both demonstrate respect for others and manage to assert their own rights. It's worth aspiring to develop the Responsible Assertiveness style, as researchers have found that this influencing style helps people to deal most successfully with stressful events.³

Being responsibly assertive means being able to give and take in a balanced fashion. Individuals who are respectful but unassertive tend to give too much of their time and risk having their own goals and desires unfulfilled. People who are assertive without showcasing sufficient respect tend to take too frequently and may be perceived as pushy or abrasive.

I came across a chief executive by the name of Angela who was a shining example of Responsible Assertiveness. One of only a few women in a bullish, male-dominated engineering business, she wasn't afraid of speaking her mind and making tough decisions. When the company was hit by a prolonged sales slump, she realized that she needed to make some of her workforce redundant. The workers were heavily unionized, so she faced stiff resistance, but she was mentally strong enough to press forward with her plans.

At the same time, though, she displayed great empathy for the employees who were to lose their jobs without ever being patronizing. She took a lot of time to talk to them individually, listening to their worries and fears, and discussing other career options and dispensing job-hunting advice. By being so supportive, she was able to make a brutal situation as tolerable as possible.

Angela was both able to do what she needed to do for the business but at the same time demonstrate that she cared about people and empathized with their plights. She managed those around her with a vigorous combination of both heart and head. Or, putting it another way, she displayed high levels of both Respect For Others and Assertion.

Developing your influencing style

Remember from our discussion of the growth mind-set in Chapter 1 that our skills are not fixed forever. None of our talents is set in

stone. The questionnaire diagnoses your *current* style of arguing to give you an inkling of how you may need to develop.

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All of us could be better, though. Even if you already tend to use the Responsible Assertiveness style, bear in mind that even experts can learn, grow and improve.

Learning from others

One of the best ways to develop your influencing style is to observe others who are currently better at it than you. So who in either your work environment or social circle has the flair you desire?

For example, if you have a high Respect For Others score but a low Assertion score, look around you for people who are good at taking what they want. You might feel that some of their tactics wouldn't suit you, but are there any that would?

Or if you currently have a lower Respect For Others score, cast around for role models who seem to have good listening skills, who demonstrate empathy and care for others. If you see them using particular phrases or see them behaving in certain ways – maybe it's their tone of voice or body language – then see if you can adapt it and adopt it into your repertoire.

In the remainder of this chapter, I'll outline specific techniques that may help you to work on becoming more effective at negotiating and influencing others. Some of the tips are more useful to those who are low on Assertion. Other pointers are more aimed at those

who are lower on Respect For Others. But if you find yourself being low on both Assertion and Respect For Others, you may find all of the advice useful.

Improving your influence: Understanding what it means to be assertive

People who score lower on the questionnaire measure of Assertion (regardless of whether they're high or low on Respect For Others) can sometimes find it difficult to communicate what they want because they aren't sure that they have the right to speak up. So an inaugural step to becoming more effective at winning arguments is to take on board what it means to be more assertive.⁴

There's no single definition of what makes up assertive behaviour, but many therapists and researchers have included the following as some of its components:

- Being able to say “no” when you want to (rather than saying “yes” to please others).
- Being able to say “yes” when you want to (rather than feeling obliged to say “no”, again perhaps to please others).
- Being able to tell others how you feel – to express your feelings in a confident (but not aggressive) manner.
- Being able to make reasonable requests and set clear boundaries on important issues – and defend them – even though it may cause conflict.

If you're lower on Assertion, can you think of situations in which you could have displayed one of the four assertive behaviours from the bullet list above?

Improving your influence: Taking the time to prepare

Some people who score lower on the measure of Assertion (again, regardless of whether they're high or low on Respect For Others) don't grasp what it means to be assertive. However, research tells us that the majority of people who are lower on Assertion *understand* the correct hypothetical response but find it hard to deliver it – they find it difficult to communicate their desires as opposed to misunderstanding that they have the right to speak up.⁵

If that's the case: enough! It's time to take control.

One helpful tip if you're lower on Assertion is simply to prepare what you'd like to say. Clearly, if you want to ask a colleague or your boss for something, you can prepare ahead of time to assemble a well-crafted argument, choose the right words and even rehearse what you wish to say. But what if someone should pounce on you, asking for something that you don't know how to say “no” to?

One helpful tip if you're lower on Assertion is simply to prepare what you'd like to say.

Years ago, a friend of mine remarked on several occasions that she always only came up with clever ripostes to other people's arguments after the fact. So I suggested that, rather than trying to argue her case there and then each time, she should ask for a “time out” to allow her to muster her thoughts.

Many people who don't necessarily think quickly on their feet could do with asking for a “time out”. When someone asks you for help or a favour, reply straightaway by saying that you would like a little time – it could be a few minutes or a day or more – to get back to them. Just because people ask you to do things that *they* feel are

important doesn't mean that you don't have things to do that are *more* worthy of your time.

If a colleague asks you whether you'd mind staying late to help with her project, you might say something like: "Let me finish what I'm doing and I'll come back to you in five minutes." That gives you the time to consider your priorities. Is her project something you really want to be doing? What other things might you feel were more critical?

To help you to construct your own ways of deflecting people's questions and asking for a time out, consider some further examples:

- "I don't know if I'll be free later yet. Let me see how I get on with my own work and I'll let you know my thoughts this afternoon."
- "I'm quite surprised by that and I don't know what to say about it yet. Let me go away and I promise I'll come back before lunchtime with a more considered response."
- "That's a big question and I'm not sure how I feel at the moment. I'd like to mull it over and get back to you about it at the end of the week. What time on Friday would be the best time to speak again?"

Hitting the pause button

Your turn. You will feel most comfortable asking for a time out if you have a phrase that you feel 100 per cent comfortable using. So look at the examples and come up with your own now:

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It may feel difficult at first to ask for thinking time, but it gets easier with practice. Try it.

Improving your influence: Applying the DEAR formula

People who score lower on Assertion may struggle to find the right words to communicate what they're thinking. They may worry that the wrong words could lead to a quarrel. But the DEAR acronym sets out a simple method for choosing the right words to say.

The four steps are as follows:

- **Describe** the facts of the situation objectively – start with facts and figures or impartial observations if possible.
- **Express** your opinions, rights or feelings – talk about what you're thinking or how a situation is making you feel.
- **Acknowledge** the other person's perspective: empathize with how the other person may be feeling. What might their concerns be?
- **Recommend** a solution (or recommend joint problem-solving): finally, talk about what you want. Or, perhaps because you're not sure what the resolution to a problem may be, suggest that you work together to discuss options and choose a solution together.

For example, suppose that you have performed well on all of your assignments at work and are now hankering for your boss to give you more responsibility. Your DEAR case may go along the following lines:

- Describe the facts of the situation objectively: "I'm sure you can see that I've exceeded all of my targets and objectives over the course of the last year."

- Express your opinions, rights or feelings: “I feel I’m now ready to take on a larger project with more responsibility and a larger budget too.”
- Acknowledge the other person’s perspective: “I appreciate that you may feel nervous about giving me more responsibility.”
- Recommend a solution (or recommend that you both work on a solution together): “But I’m not suggesting that you give me a bigger project and leave me entirely alone. Perhaps it would make sense for us to have weekly check-up meetings about the project to begin with.”

Or suppose that you have a long-standing commitment to go out one evening to celebrate a loved one’s birthday. A colleague asks you at short notice to stay late to help with a project that you think isn’t remarkably urgent. Your DEAR response could go something like:

- Describe the facts of the situation objectively: “On this particular evening, I’ve already got plans.”
- Express your opinions, rights or feelings: “I’ve already committed to going out to celebrate someone’s birthday.”
- Acknowledge the other person’s perspective: “I appreciate that you feel overloaded.”
- Recommend a solution (or recommend that you both try to think of a solution together): “But perhaps there are other people who could help you with it – or I could help you with it tomorrow morning if that’s any use.”

No one claims that the DEAR approach will allow you to present your case elegantly and eloquently. But if you struggle with getting your point across, it can be a handy starting point. You may feel a little awkward the first handful of times you apply it, but most people who deploy it find that they get better quite rapidly with practice.

Articulating your arguments

Role playing is a powerful method for learning or honing skills. Pretend that you have been confronted with each of the situations below. Using the DEAR acronym, how would you deal with each? If you like, you could write down your responses. But if you wanted to get the biggest boost to your assertiveness skills, ask friends if they would mind letting you practise speaking your requests out loud to them.

Try working through each of the following:

- Your boss seems to be giving all of the menial and boring tasks to you rather than sharing them around the team more equally.
- You're in a restaurant having dinner. Unfortunately, the waiter brings over a plate of food that has gone cold.
- You're struggling to complete an assignment. One of your colleagues doesn't seem overly busy and you suspect that she could help.
- You feel that the person you live with is not contributing enough to the household chores.

So how about putting DEAR into practice? Think about a specific situation in which the DEAR technique could help you to assert yourself. Have a go at writing out your responses under each of the four headings. Then practise saying them out loud a couple of times until you feel comfortable enough to have a go for real.

Improving your influence: Engaging in counterfactual thinking

Here's a final proven technique for you if you happen to score lower on Assertion (irrespective of whether you're high or low on Respect For Others). University of California business school researcher Laura Kray and her colleagues conducted several experiments looking at how different types of preparation could help people who were about to engage in a business negotiation.

Learning from experience often involves thinking about previous situations and reflecting on how we could have done things otherwise. Kray and her colleagues asked groups of business negotiators to engage in one of two discrete types of reasoning about the past:

- Additive counterfactual thinking: deliberating about things that they wished they *had* done, for example, "If only I had made my request earlier" or "If only I had listened more instead of talking so much." It's called additive counterfactual thinking because effectively it's thinking about actions they wish they had added into a previous agreement.
- Subtractive counterfactual thinking: mulling over things that they wished they had *not* done (i.e. activities they wished they could have subtracted or removed from a previous deal). Examples could include, "If only I had not talked so quickly" or "If only I had not lost my temper."

In two separate experiments, Kray and her team found that one of these two forms of counterfactual thinking resulted in significantly improved negotiation performance.⁶ One involved thinking about actions that negotiators wished they *had* taken; the other involved actions they wished they had *not* taken. Care to guess which one was the more beneficial?

The answer: the researchers found that additive counterfactual thinking gave negotiators a measurable advantage. In other words, it pays to spend some time before a discussion reminding yourself about a previous transaction and what you wished you had done, what you could have added to the conversation.

It almost goes without saying – it sounds like common sense – that preparation and planning would help us to assert ourselves and bargain more effectively. But I like the finding by Kray and her team because it tells us an unreservedly specific way in which we can be using our preparation time.

It pays to spend some time before a discussion reminding yourself about a previous transaction and what you wished you had done.

Identifying past flaws and foibles

The next time you want to have an effective, assertive discussion, take a few minutes to engage in some counterfactual thinking. This exercise is adapted from the paper published by Kray and colleagues.

At the end of a discussion or negotiation, people often have thoughts like “if only”, in that they can see how things might have turned out better. For instance, if you’re having a discussion with a colleague, you may think, “If only I had stated my request a bit more loudly” or “If only I had brought my notes with me to prompt me through the discussion.” Often, we wish we had done something extra to achieve a better outcome.

Spend a few minutes now listing *three* specific actions that in retrospect you could have taken to improve your performance in a specific discussion. Each thought you list must start with the phrase “If only I had . . .”

(Continued)

So write out three sentences beginning with the phrase:

- If only I had . . .
- If only I had . . .
- If only I had . . .

Once you've done that, you'll give yourself the best chance of having a firm but positive discussion.

Finally, remember that this technique has been verified by science. When can you give it a go?

Improving your influence: Understanding the need for understanding

We will come shortly to the first tactic specifically geared towards those individuals who may score lower on the questionnaire measure of Respect For Others – and especially for those who are also currently higher on Assertion. Being more respectful is of particular importance when we need to deal with the same individuals over and over again. If we only need to interact with someone – possibly a colleague from an overseas department or a supplier – on a one-off basis, we can probably get away with coming across as quite pushy in order to get what we want. Why should we care if they feel a bit bruised and battered by an exchange?

But if we need to deal with colleagues in our own team, regular clients or even friends and family, then being forceful could cost us in the long-term. Sure, they may do as we want a couple of times,

but ultimately they may come to resent us, perhaps looking for ways to undermine us or warn others not to deal with us.

I once coached a newly promoted 35-year-old marketing manager I'll call Neil who was fantastic at designing campaigns and negotiating with advertising agencies. He had a reputation for wearing beautifully tailored suits that showed off his trim physique, but was regrettably better known as a boss who was stubborn and overbearing with his team. But with a concerted effort on his part over the course of six months, his team reported noticeable adjustments in his willingness to compromise.

The secret to his transformation? He altered how he ran one-to-one meetings with the members of his team: he began by asking more questions and taking notes. Only after paraphrasing what he thought he'd heard did Neil then start to talk about what he wanted his team to do. It wasn't that he hadn't been willing to be less stubborn and domineering; like many people who are lower on Respect For Others, he'd never truly realized how much of an issue it had been or what to do about it.

Now I'm sure you've heard how important it is to listen to other people. It's a message we've heard time and again. But when we're trying to get our own points across, how often do we *really* listen and take on board what others are saying? The truth is that we frequently don't do it to the extent that we could.

Think about it another way: simply telling others to do what we want rarely works. Telling them what we want from them or how they need to change doesn't tend to get results. It's only when people first feel that they have been understood – that they have shared their opinions, grievances and feelings *and* had them taken on board – that they can be receptive to what we may have to say.

How often do we really listen and take on board what others are saying?

Improving your influence: Helping others to *feel* understood

This particular technique for bolstering our Respect For Others involves both what psychologists call perspective-giving and perspective-taking. But in plain English, that simply means giving others the opportunity to talk (letting them engage in perspective-giving) and then summarizing to *demonstrate* that we understand what they said (engaging in explicit perspective-taking).

Cognitive scientists Emile Bruneau and Rebecca Saxe at the famed Massachusetts Institute of Technology have tested the effects of perspective-giving and perspective-taking amongst groups that have traditionally had fiendishly adversarial relationships, such as Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East. In one study, for example, they video-recorded discussions between white Americans (who were opposed to immigration) and Mexican immigrants.

The scientists first invited the Mexican immigrants to describe the difficulties that they faced in their societies. The Americans then had to summarize as accurately as possible what they had been told by the Mexicans.

When the researchers then asked each of the two groups to rate their attitudes towards the other group, they found that the intervention improved both groups' attitudes to each other. Feeling heard made the Mexicans rate the Americans as less ignorant and selfish. And listening made the Americans rate the Mexicans as more thoughtful and honest.⁷

A critic could argue that the study only confirms what we knew all along. That it's common sense that listening matters.

But my observation is that so-called common sense is often uncommonly put into action. The lesson is clear: when we yearn to change other people's minds, we must not only listen but also *demonstrate* that we have listened. When we help others to *feel* heard, we help to restore their dignity with the result that they warm to us and may be more amenable to our requests too. Or, as American journalist Abigail van Buren once said: "The less you talk, the more you're listened to."

When we yearn to change other people's minds, we must not only listen but also demonstrate that we have listened.

Applying a framework for listening

As I mentioned, I'm sure you've probably heard on more than one occasion the importance of listening to what others have to say. But why don't we do it?

The simple truth is that we get caught up in our own objectives – what we want from a discussion – rather than thinking about the other party being a person (or persons) with wants and needs too. When I'm training clients in better listening and negotiation skills, the key to success seems to centre on taking notes. The next time you're having a slightly contentious discussion or negotiation with someone, try following these steps:

- Begin by sharing your point of view briefly. For instance, if you requested the meeting, you may wish to state your case for a promotion, more responsibility or whatever else you want.
- Next, **ask questions** to find out the other person's perspective, for example, "How do you feel about this?", "What's your take on the situation?" and "I'm not saying that I can give you everything you want, but what would you ideally want from this discussion?"

(Continued)

- Then listen to the responses and **take comprehensive notes**. If you can't get everything down, ask the other person to slow down: "I don't want to miss anything, so could you repeat that for me again please?"
- Keep taking notes until the other person has run out of things to say. Steer clear of the temptation to jump in to refute any of the other person's claims yet.
- Next, read your notes and **summarize out loud what you think the other person said**. Check that you've understood correctly by using phrases like "If I've understood correctly, you said that . . ."

The really key steps (in bold) are asking questions, taking notes and then repeating back what's been said. A lot of people ask questions but only the exceptional few make the concerted effort to write the answers down and then summarize them.

Only when you have paraphrased everything that you think you heard should you proceed with the rest of the discussion. Then you could build your case by using the DEAR method (see *Improving your influence: Applying the DEAR formula*, on page 55).

Asking questions and taking notes doesn't sound particularly difficult, right? And you're right that it's not *intellectually* difficult. We can all grasp the need. It's *putting it into practice* – going against years of habit – that requires diligence and effort.

Researchers such as Deborah Ancona at MIT's Sloan School of Management distinguish between listening (which she calls "inquiring": actively asking questions to comprehend the thoughts and feelings of others) versus telling (which she calls "advocating": talking about your opinions).⁸ If there's a common fault, it's that people who are lower on Respect tend to do more telling/advocating than listening/inquiring.

You *can* change your style. The only question is: will you?

Improving your influence: Adopting both/and thinking

In life we often categorize the people and situations we encounter. It makes life easier to be able to say that someone is either one thing or another. John is creative while Lucy is not. Patrick is shy while Rosanna talks too much. Neela is careful while Alicia cuts corners. I am right and you are wrong.

It's a trap that many of us fall into – and not just those who tend to be lower on the questionnaire measure of Respect For Others. But to describe people in such sweeping terms is more often than not an oversimplification. People are rarely either entirely one thing or wholly something else. In reality, most of humanity – and that includes ourselves – can be *both* one thing *and* another.

People are rarely either entirely one thing or wholly something else.

It may be that John has *both* some exquisite ideas *and* more than a few stupid ones; Lucy may be *both* not very creative at work *and* creative in her home life; Patrick may be *both* shy around strangers *and* a chatterbox with close confidantes; Rosanna may *both* talk too much *and* yet be insecure deep-down at the same time.

Almost all of us are driven by a mix of different motives. At times we may behave in one way, but occasionally we may lapse and do the precise opposite. For example, while most people would never steal from a friend, surveys show that many cheat on their taxes and effectively steal from the government.⁹ Most people try to act calmly and to treat others fairly but can find themselves occasionally losing their temper, sulking or behaving a bit selfishly.

People are complex creatures, and it's a good idea to remember that we can be *both* one thing *and* another. People can both be organized

at work and yet disorganized at home. They may be both unassuming with some colleagues and yet forthcoming with other colleagues or clients. They may even behave mostly one way in meetings but then surprise people by doing the precise opposite on another day.

Challenging your own thinking

What either/or distinctions have you made about the people in your life? Perhaps you think of some individuals as helpful and other people as not. Or some people as friends and others as enemies.

Can you think of ways in which you can de-categorize such distinctions using the idea of both/and? For instance, suppose that you have a colleague called Owen who seems to be rather uncooperative. Try reconceptualizing him as someone who is *both* unhelpful to you *and* helpful to at least certain others. Once you can hold those seemingly contradictory concepts in your mind, you can start to think about how Owen's relationships with those other people differ.

What is it that those other colleagues do that makes Owen so much more amenable and helpful? Once you have the answer to that question, you may be able to act on getting Owen to help you out more too.

Have a think now about some of the key people in your life. What boxes have you put them in? What either/or labels have you applied to their behaviour or personalities?

Thinking in terms of either/or limits our ability to deal with people and new situations. Either/or tries to simplify a messy, jagged world that in actuality isn't easily categorized. In order to deal with people

and uncharted situations successfully, we must not only tolerate complexity but also actively revel in both/and.

All of this is of particular importance when we're not getting on well with others or trying to argue a case. If we're in a dispute with others, it's rarely the case that we are entirely right and the other party completely wrong.

In order to deal with people and uncharted situations successfully, we must not only tolerate complexity but also actively revel in both/and.

Consider a case of a manager, Gwen, who is disciplining her employee Kieran for repeatedly turning up to work late. Gwen may feel that she is right because Kieran has failed to perform his duties satisfactorily.

But Kieran may feel that he is doing the right thing in being late to work because it's more important for him to get his son to school safely every day. Perhaps he feels morally justified in turning up to work late because he hates Gwen's bullying style of management and is trying to preserve his own sanity. Or he feels that he is in the right to turn up late because he stays late most evenings.

Either/or thinking promotes a black-and-white, overly simplistic way of looking at situations: if I'm right, then you *must* be wrong. But in many situations, it turns out that both parties can be both somewhat right and somewhat wrong.

Even if I am technically in the right because of certain laws, regulations or rules, it's possible that you may still feel morally right or emotionally vindicated to behave the way you do. The most effective negotiators accept that both/and is invariably the more realistic way of looking at situations in our sometimes mind-bogglingly complex world.

Accepting that *both* you *and* others can be right at the same time

If you're stuck in a squabble with someone, remember that *both* of you can be right *and* the other person can feel right or at least justified in his or her behaviour too. Even if you are totally certain that the other person is mainly to blame for a situation, consider that you may *also* have contributed to it – either by your action or inaction.

Before you decide to discuss a sensitive or difficult matter, ask yourself: “Either by my action *or* inaction, how may *I* have inadvertently contributed to this situation?”

I'm sure you can see how keeping the notion of both/and in mind is a vital component of winning people over. But it's likewise an important way of thinking when it comes to our careers too. For example, we'll see that office politics is not entirely bad or good. You can both play politics and have good motives. More on that in Chapter 5: Winning the Race.

Improving your influence: Changing the name of the game

What kind of game do you think you are playing when you're having a discussion or negotiation? People who are high on Assertion but lower on Respect For Others often think of negotiations as what's known as a “fixed-pie game”.

Allow me to explain. A fixed-pie game is one in which the benefits are like a freshly baked pie of a certain size. If one person called John takes three-quarters of the pie, then obviously Jane can only take a maximum of one-quarter of the pie. If John were to grab more of the pie – say he gets 85 per cent of the pie, then it must mean taking more from Jane. She can only end up with a maximum of 15 per cent of the pie.

However, many negotiations are not fixed-pie games. For instance, say two people are haggling over the terms of a promotion. Paul is asking for £90,000 a year as his basic salary but his would-be boss, Theresa, is only able to offer a maximum of £85,000. So in terms of money, it may indeed be the case that there is a limited amount of metaphorical pie. For Paul to win, Theresa has to lose by taking money out of some other budget. Or for Theresa to win, Paul has to lose by agreeing to take less.

But there may be other concessions, allowances or deals that either person could make. Theresa could ask Paul to accept a lower salary but offer him every Friday afternoon off from work. She could perhaps encourage him to accept the lower salary in return for being able to hire and fire and put together the perfect team without interference from her.

Paul could ask for the higher salary but agree to take on an additional task or responsibility which would really help Theresa out. Or he could ask for the higher salary but agree to save Theresa money by putting it in writing that he would only ever travel by economy class rather than business class.

Going back to our pie analogy, thinking about those broader concessions and proposals is like thinking first about a way to bake a bigger pie before deciding how to share it out.

Why does this matter?

Research, of course. Nir Halevy, a rising star of a professor at Stanford University, has found that people's perceptions about the games that they think they are playing change their behaviour. If we believe that we are fighting over who can take away the biggest slice of a fixed-pie, then of course we may come across as more combative. In order for me to win more, you have to lose.

People's perceptions about the games that they think they are playing change their behaviour.

But if we can alter our thinking and conceive of discussions as opportunities to work together to first bake a larger pie before divvying it up, we may be able to broker terms that end up being better for both parties. The additional benefit from Halevy's research is that people who think of the game as *bake-a-bigger-pie-then-share-it-out* also tend to come across as more helpful, friendly, kind and trustworthy.¹⁰

Thinking in terms of collaboration and compromise

Simply understanding the difference between a fixed-pie game and a *bake-a-bigger-pie-then-share-it-out* game may already help us to behave more cooperatively and less aggressively. To further encourage this shift in your thinking, chew over the following questions before going into any discussion or negotiation:

- What steps can I take in order to make this more of a cooperative rather than combative discussion?
- What steps could I suggest that we take *together* to reach the best, mutually beneficial agreement possible?
- What concessions, allowances or compromises would I be willing to trade off?
- What additional concessions, allowances or compromises could I ask for?

Improving your influence: Keeping our emotions in check

Here's a final tip for all of us.

But first, a question: how would you describe your voice? Calm and unruffled? Enthusiastic and energetic? Anxious and apprehensive? There are lots of ways in plain English of describing how we speak. But scientists use the term “prosody” to refer to speech features such as stress, intonation and rhythm. For example, if you have a voice that has a large dynamic range – which varies, say, from a whisper to a shout on a regular basis – your voice would be said to have a high degree of prosodic emphasis.

Parents often speak to their babies with exaggerated prosodic emphasis. They speak quietly and then more loudly; they allow their voice to range from rumbling bass notes to soaring squeaks. And they do all of this possibly because it may help infants to understand speech.¹¹ But what's good for talking to babies may not be so good when we're trying to influence others or argue our case.

In a study written up in the prestigious *Journal of Applied Psychology*, researchers Jared Curhan and Alex Pentland at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology asked experimental participants to assume the roles of either an employer or a candidate in a recruitment scenario. The employer's role was to hire the candidate for as little cost as possible. Clearly, the candidate's aim was to get the best compensation package possible.

Observing many dozens of negotiations, the researchers found that people who demonstrated *more* emphasis in their voices tended to perform *less* well. Being emphatic was a liability in the discussions, irrespective of whether the participant was the employer or the candidate. Even more startlingly, the investigators only

measured prosodic emphasis during the first five minutes of the transaction.¹²

Why? Why should initial emphasis – a more dynamic voice – lead to worse negotiation outcomes?

We typically use emphasis – sometimes deliberately but more often inadvertently – to convey emotion. We speak more loudly or shout when we're angry. Our voices may become more high-pitched when we're excited or waver when we're unnerved. Therefore, the use of emotion may betray the importance we attach to the issues we're discussing – especially during those early minutes of the conversation when we're sizing each other up.

The use of emotion may betray the importance we attach to the issues we're discussing.

So. The moral: stay calm. Don't enter into a discussion over an issue when you're feeling excited, unhappy or outraged about it. Wait until you can view the situation from a cooler, more detached perspective; otherwise, your voice may inadvertently give you – and the game – away.

Putting it all together

Winning arguments isn't a skill that comes overnight. But it is a skill. And it can be honed, developed and cultivated over time.

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Hopefully the research we covered on the growth mind-set in Chapter 1: Developing a Winning Outlook is still fresh in your mind. We *can* develop our skills so long as we have the right mental attitude and put in the work. We

can *all* improve our flair for arguing and asserting ourselves more effectively.

Whatever your current level of ability – whether you want to improve on the questionnaire measure of Assertion or Respect For Others or both – you can do it with effort and patience. So go on, get started.

Onwards and upwards

- First of all, remember that it's fiendishly difficult to win an argument when emotions are high. Whenever possible, it's much better to have a calm, rational discussion when you (and others) can prepare your proposals and discuss what you each want from a situation.
- Use the questionnaire starting on page 40 to diagnose your current interpersonal style. The questionnaire teaches us that effective Responsible Assertiveness requires both Assertion and Respect For Others; one without the other is only half of the picture. Once you understand whether you need to work either on your Assertion skills or on your Respect For Others skills (or both), you can take the necessary steps to begin your improvement.
- Remember that either/or thinking (categorizing folks as either entirely one thing or wholly something else) is usually an unhelpful oversimplification. People are rarely angry, generous, uncooperative or anything else 100 per cent of the time. Keeping in mind the concept of both/and allows us to think about people and situations in a more realistic and therefore less combative way.
- Enhance your assertiveness by using the DEAR method to describe situations, express your opinions, acknowledge others' perspectives and recommend solutions. If Assertion is

currently a challenge for you, putting the DEAR technique into action may at first feel awkward or unnerving. But it's a tried-and-tested approach that has helped many people to get their way more effectively.

- If bolstering your Respect For Others score is your goal, start with the twin techniques of perspective-giving (i.e. allowing people to tell you what they feel and want) and perspective-taking (i.e. summarizing and paraphrasing what they said). After all, while people repeatedly protest that colleagues, bosses, friends or even family “don't listen enough”, you rarely hear the complaint that they “listen too much”.
- Finally, bear in mind that becoming more effective at winning arguments is perhaps best conceived of as *pre-empting* quarrels and instead listening to others, showing that we comprehend their points of view, and then carefully sharing our ideas.