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## Because I Said So

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### **The Art and Science of changing minds**

“The attacks against Trump have taught me something about myself,” one Donald Trump supporter was quoted as saying. “I have defended him and said things I really didn’t believe or support because I was put in a defensive position.”

Whatever your political views, it’s likely that you’ve experienced something similar. There’s something about being in a heated debate or argument which makes us defend ourselves and lash out verbally regardless of how fervently we even believe the side we’re supporting.

A few years ago, a friend and I stopped speaking for a while after an argument about Canadian psychologist and political/cultural commentator Jordan Peterson. He was a fan and I am not. Although I’m often happy to agree to differ when it comes to opposing views, on this occasion I surprised myself by how angry the conversation made me and by how important it was for me to win.

When information is presented to us in an authoritarian way, it reminds us of the kind of “because I said so” instructions that were doled out when we were children. That kind of powerlessness is something we seek to avoid at all costs and our adultselves end up asserting ourselves loudly even if it means we end up defending views with a kind of intensity that we might not quite feel.

Most people stick to their views more out of habit than as a result of critical thinking and more out of emotional triggers than considered analysis. It’s also not only at heated family dinner table discussions that views can be intractable. The same dynamics of trying to convince the other side by speaking louder and more forcefully play out in the workplace, in education and of course in politics.

But if we genuinely prize the process of learning and of curiosity more highly than we prize being right, we need to learn how to suspend our need to win, hold our egos in check and manage our desire to destroy our opponent in the process of rhetoric.

Of course there are times when it’s important to invest preparation and energy into changing someone’s mind. Although winning a debate might not be what drives you, it might be necessary to convert someone to your way of thinking in order to win a business pitch or to convince someone you love to stop smoking. In these instances it’s useful to look for guidance from those who have made a study of the process.

One such scholar is Howard Gardner. The famous Harvard psychologist who is best known for his theory of multiple intelligences, has also devoted research to the art and science of changing minds. In his book *Changing Minds* (Harvard Business School Press, 2004) Gardner outlines two essential principles to remember in the context of changing the minds of others.

The first is the idea that you have to repeat yourself in many different ways. Gardner calls this idea “representational redescriptions. “

These may include stories, charts or cartoons, humour, demonstrations and simulations or most importantly, embodying the message in your own behaviour. But by delivering your message through a mix of formats, Gardner maintains that you increase the chances that your audience will understand your idea.

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“And the deeper your listeners’ understanding, the greater their ability to let go of firmly entrenched notions and embrace new ones.” he explains.

The second idea which Gardner shares, that is far harder to counteract, is that people underestimate just how powerful their resistances are.

He explains that there are three factors involved in resistance: age, emotion and public stance. Firstly, the longer your neural networks have been running one way, the harder it is to rewire them. Secondly the things that you feel most strongly about emotionally are the hardest to change your mind about. And thirdly, most difficult to change are the convictions you develop around views on which you’ve taken a public stand. Particularly for people in public life this is especially hard to reverse. Against this backdrop, when I analyse my own resistance around hearing my friend’s opposing views, it starts to make more sense as to why I was triggered without even realising it.

Jordan Peterson is a master debater himself. He’s scored some resounding and even humiliating victories against his opponents over the years but he’s also skilled enough to know how to make his point without alienating his opponent when he wants to. Some of the strategies he uses are:

- Start with where you agree. This makes your opponent more open to alternate viewpoints
- Clarify what the other person is saying in a way that they would agree with
- Talk about “the argument” rather than “your argument” to take personal attack out of the equation
- Establish your good intentions “e.g. I’m not trying to trap you here” or “we’re on the same page here”

There are many other strategies we can study if changing minds convincingly is our goal. There will always be occasions where we have to pitch a superior solution or convince others of a new and better way.

As Chris Anderson president of TED says in his book TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking: “Persuasion means convincing an audience that the way they currently see the world isn’t quite right.”

But perhaps what the world needs more than superior debating skills and knowing how to convert someone to our way of thinking are skills like listening, cultivating curiosity and the ability to find common ground.

In a world where many of us live in an echo chamber where we choose to befriend people like us on Facebook, read news channels that support our own political views and look for research that confirms what we already believe, it requires courage to have our own deeply held views challenged and to befriend people who disagree with us.

We do this best if we separate who we are from the perspectives we hold and when we remember that our views and opinions don’t have to define us.

Viewed in this way, the real victory is to leave a conversation not by converting someone else to your way of thinking but by making sure that you leave it knowing more than you did when it started.