During the past several years I have heard many people ask a variation of the following question:

How can I be more successful in what I do?

I think that most people would have some type of an answer for this question, but I also think that many would say, “I don’t know.” However, being the person that I am, I started to think about this question. I have heard it as a father, a university professor, and a CEO. Several years ago, I began to wonder if I could come up with an answer that would relate to anyone, regardless of the situation. (Sure, I could ride my Harley or Bourget, go on a vacation, or sell things on eBay, but I wanted to try to answer the question.)

INTRODUCTION

The first thing I did was to pay close attention to people when they make decisions or when they learn something. What I learned is that most people search for the easiest way to do things. I don’t think there is anything wrong with that. In fact, the easiest way to do things or learn things is probably the best approach. But I won’t take credit for that idea. Although the idea of simplicity may originate with the first human being, 14th century English philosopher, William of Ockham (also spelled Occam), first publicized it with his idea of “Ockham’s Razor.” Willie, as his friends probably called him, said (paraphrase) “The simplest approach is usually the best.” (William actually said something closer to: entities should not be multiplied without necessity.)

In the quest to find an answer to the question, it seemed logical to follow Ockham’s philosophy. It didn’t make sense to follow a philosophy of “the most complicated approach is usually the best.”

My initial ideas about an answer to the question led to other thoughts. First, it became evident that it would be helpful to find a universal answer to the question; that is, how to be successful in every facet of life—personal, family, friendships, school, and career. This made sense. It didn’t make sense to find an answer that would relate to only one situation. One answer that fits all situations makes much more sense (and it’s simple).

BACKGROUND

As I thought about finding one answer, my first question was: Is it possible to have one answer or answer “set” that would fit all situations? There are two approaches to answering this question. Let’s take a look at both sides of the argument.

One side would take a pessimistic view and say that there is no single answer (or rule or procedure) that would apply to all situations. These people might say, “For every rule there is an exception.” Or, “There is no way that one answer, one rule, or one procedure can apply to all situations, so why waste time trying to find it.” Oh no, stumped already. I might as well give up.

Then there is the optimistic approach—the side that does not give up. Well, low and behold, while thinking about this problem—“For every rule there is an exception”—I happened to see the Q & A column...
written by Marilyn vos Savant, the person with the highest recorded IQ in the world (Parade, October 20, 1996, Page 18). In that column (a total coincidence), a man asked: “What is the exception to the rule that ‘For every rule there is an exception’?” Ms vos Savant’s answer was, “. . . the exception to your rule [for every rule there is an exception] would be a rule with no exceptions.” (Italics added). A light bulb went off! This must relate in some way to developing one answer to the question of how to become more successful.

Is there a rule without exceptions? Can such a rule be developed? Are there attempts to find such rules? Are there investigations being conducted to search for such simplicity? I found that the answer is “yes.” One such investigation is by physicists who are searching for what is called a “Grand Unified Theory” (GUT) to explain the universe and everything in it. These scientists are searching for a rule (actually a formula) that has no exceptions. Now I knew what I was searching for . . . a Grand Unified Theory to answer the question.

“Now,” I thought, “searching for a GUT in physics is an admirable task, but I don’t relate very well to quarks, black holes, and quantum physics. It seems that if I am going to try to develop a GUT for the ‘success’ question, the focus should relate more closely to home—more closely to what we deal with every day.” So I read articles and books, I listened to speeches and presentations, I watched people in everyday situations, and I listened to the radio and watched TV. In all those countless hours, I found one thing that is universally common: communication. We communicate every minute of every day. That has to be the key. The search for a Grand Unified Theory to answer the question had to relate to communication in one way or another. The importance of communication seemed to be a more realistic area than searching for the importance of a quark. I just wasn’t sure. (What I didn’t know then is that I would find more than one Grand Unified Theory.)

THE BEGINNING

I had to keep in mind that my goal was to develop an answer to the question stated in the first paragraph: How can I become more successful? I kept thinking whether there could be a “Grand Unified Theory” in communications that would provide people with a pathway to success. Could there be a communications’ GUT that would address the communications problems we have in every facet of our lives? There had to be. “No way” is a phrase I don’t like to hear.

How could I find the answer? I received a hint from Sir Isaac Newton. When asked how he developed the laws of celestial dynamics, Newton said, “By thinking about them without ceasing” (Ferris, 1988:116). Now, I am NOT comparing myself to Newton, but I did follow his advice. I thought about the problem without ceasing. After about two years, I realized that I was on the right track. The key to developing a GUT to answer the question had to relate to communications. It became clear that the more we know about human communication, the easier it would be to address the question.

However, after more reading, listening, and watching, I realized that many people have already addressed developing a communications’ GUT without even knowing it. This was clear to me by all of the “numbered lists” available, such as Steven Covey’s The Seven Characteristics of Highly Effective People. There are literally hundreds of “self help” books that attempt to simplify all aspects of our lives (nearly all in the area of communication). The search is there, but most people don’t realize it.

FOCUS

After all the thinking (and many six-packs of iced tea), it was evident that I needed to learn more about communication and how we learn things. Specifically, I needed the answer to two questions:

1. What is communication?
2. How do we learn things and make decisions?

Keep in mind that simplicity was the guiding philosophy.
COMMUNICATION AND PERSUASION

Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, discussed a variety of things about communication in his book *The Art of Rhetoric* (a good sleeping “pill” by the way). However, one of the most important ideas he developed is that communication and persuasion are interchangeable terms. In other words, we never communicate without persuading and we never persuade without communicating. Or,

\[
\text{Communication} = \text{Persuasion} \\
\text{and} \\
\text{Persuasion} = \text{Communication}
\]

Now, considering that Aristotle is an ancient (dead) guy, it might be helpful to take a look at more recent definitions of the terms. What does *Webster’s Dictionary* say?

**Communication**: an act or instance of transmitting; a verbal or written message; a process by which information is exchanged between individuals thorough a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior.

**Persuasion**: to move by argument; discussion to a belief, position, or course of action.

While Webster does not say that both terms are the interchangeable, the modern definitions support what Aristotle proposed. Communication and persuasion are defined in much the same way. So I decided to go with that.

However, we can take this relationship one more step. In 1967, Watzlawick, Beavin-Bavelas, & Jackson developed a wonderful argument for the fact that we cannot not communicate.

Everything we do or say communicates a message. The message may be in one of several forms—verbal communication, nonverbal communication, or *metacommunication*. The bottom line is that no matter what we do we always communicate a message—100% of the time. But wait! That means that it can be called a Grand Unified Theory in and of itself. It is a rule without an exception: *We cannot not communicate*.

If one GUT exists, then there must be another to answer the “success” question. It became clear that an understanding of how communication/persuasion works could be the foundation for another Grand Unified Theory. (In the remainder of this discussion, the term “persuasion” is used to represent both communication AND persuasion.)

**SO NOW WHAT?**

How does persuasion work? Since the time of Aristotle, many descriptions of how persuasion works have been presented. In fact, a discussion about the theories of persuasion is contained in almost any book on persuasion or communication. However, the simplest description is probably the **5 Stages of Persuasion**; the five steps that all people pass through in order to make a decision about anything or to learn anything. After a great deal of thought and further reading, it became clear that the 5 Stages of Persuasion is a universal process.

**FIVE STAGES OF PERSUASION**

The 5 Stages of Persuasion are:

- **Unawareness**
- **Awareness**
- **Comprehension**
- **Conviction**
- **Action**
These stages apply to literally any decision we ever make, from purchases of products and services, to decisions about dating, marriage, careers, religion, to learning any concept, from spelling a name to building a nuclear reactor. There are no exceptions. This is a universal process and it is another rule without an exception.

The 5 Stages of Persuasion is a simple process. A person is first unaware of a product, service, or idea, then moves to awareness after gathering (being exposed to) some amount of information. The person then passes into the comprehension and conviction stages after gathering (being exposed to) addition information. The action stage is reached when the person buys a product or service, takes a specific action, makes a decision, or learns something.

It’s that simple. To persuade anyone to take some kind of action, believe anything, or learn anything, the person must be taken through the Five Stages. This is a rule without exception, but the problem is that the process is not always 100% successful. Many people are forever stuck in unawareness, awareness, comprehension, or conviction and never reach the action stage. In addition, some people may reach one stage but may actually go back to a previous stage. For example, a person may buy something as mundane as Hostess Cupcakes for years, then stop buying for one reason or another. This person, either from a comment by a friend or relative or exposure to an advertisement about Hostess Cupcakes may say, “I haven’t had one of those in years” and then once again enter the action stage by buying Hostess Cupcakes the next trip to the grocery store.

What do we know about the Five Stages of Persuasion? We know that:

1. All people pass through the stages for every decision they make or anything they learn.
2. All people pass through the stages at different speeds—there is no universal timing.
3. Not all people make it to the Action stage.

The only way to move people through the Five Stages is through repetition of the message. In most cases, people do not make decisions (or learn something) after only one exposure to a message. The process nearly always requires several exposures.

However, there are also many things we don’t know about the Five Stages. For example, we don’t know:

1. How many exposures are required to move a person through each stage.
2. How many people are in each stage of the process at any given time.
3. When people will move from one stage to another.
4. Why people move from one stage to another.
5. Where people are when they move from one stage to another.

We do know that all people must pass through the stages to make a decision, but we don’t know where, when, how, and why they will pass through the stages. Lucky for us that we understand that in order to move people through the stages, we must have repetition of the message.

There is no way to circumvent The 5 Stages of Persuasion. No company or manufacturer can slip around the process to sell products or services to consumers. No person or group can slip around the process in an attempt to persuade another person or group to do something or believe in something. No one can slip around the process to get someone to learn something. The process is universal. It is, as mentioned, a rule without exception. It is, after all this discussion, a Grand Unified Theory.
HOW DO THE 5 STAGES WORK?

Here are a few examples of the 5 Stages work. I’m sure you can think of many of other examples.

1. Scenario 1: A salesman is in a hurry to get a proposal to a client. After quickly scribbling a draft on a sheet of paper, he throws the letter down on his assistant’s desk and says, “Type this. I need it right now.” Will the assistant jump to the computer? Probably not. The salesman didn’t use the 5 Stages.

Scenario 2: The salesman scribbles his notes, goes to his assistant and says, “I know it’s late in the day, (unawareness) but I just talked to Mr. Smith about a new contract (awareness). He said that if we can fax this proposal to him in the next 30 minutes, he will sign it (comprehension). This is important to our company and could mean a big bonus for all of us (conviction). Do you think you can stay a little late and get this out? I’ll stay too in case you have any questions.” The assistant says, “Yes.” (action)

2. Scenario 1: You’re with a friend and you happen to remember a conversation you had the previous day about the color of the book you use for mass media research. Without any introduction (because your friend should remember the conversation as clearly as you do), you say something like, “It’s blue.” Your friend says, “Blue what? You say, “You know, blue. How can you forget?” (You think, “He’s dumb.”) Your friend says, “Forget what?” You say, “Oh, just forget the whole thing.”

Scenario 2: You say to your friend, “Remember the discussion we had yesterday about the color of our research book?” (unawareness). “Yea, I remember that.” (comprehension, conviction). “Well,” you say, “the book is blue.” Your friend says, “Yea, you’re right.” (action)

AND THERE IS MORE . . .

We now have a GUT. Can it be used in any other way? The answer is, “yes.” Since I left the academic life for the private sector life many years ago, I have run several successful companies. In all of those companies, I followed a very simple 3-step operating philosophy that works for a single person or a group of people:

1. Find out what they want.
2. Give it to them.
3. Tell them that you gave it to them.

In my business career, I found that this 3-step process cannot fail—it simply can’t. Then I realized that this process is also another Grand Unified Theory. If the 3-Step Operating Philosophy is followed (by a person, group, or company), it cannot fail. Consider some of these examples (and you can develop many more):

1. A company that makes small kitchen appliances asks its customers about their desire for a new microwave oven and finds that the demand is high. The company then asks its customers for suggestions on how to make the new oven, and asks how much they would be willing to pay for the oven. The company makes the oven according to the customers’ suggestions and sells it at the price the customers suggested. How can the company fail?

2. Your best friend’s birthday is next week. What do you give to the person? You have no idea, so you ask him/her for a suggestion. Get that item—you can’t fail.

3. You’re taking a class in mass media research and you need an “A” to maintain your perfect record. What do you do? Ask the teacher what he/she expects from you to earn an “A” for the class and give it to him/her. You cannot fail. (But what would you do if you received a “B”? Go to the 5 Stages of Persuasion.)

The 5 Stages of Persuasion and the 3-Step Operating Philosophy cannot fail.
CONCLUSION

In the beginning, I was searching for one rule without an exception. Actually, I found three:

1. We cannot not communicate.
2. Everyone passes through the 5 Stages to make a decision or learn something.
3. The 3-Step Operating Philosophy cannot fail.

REFERENCES


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