

Communication and Persuasion

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BECAUSE MENTAL ATTITUDES are learned they are not immutable. But they *do* have a built-in resistance to change. They are formed or learned in relation to an identifiable referent, such as a person, group, object, institution, issue or event. They can be designated as pro or anti. Those people who have highly organised attitudes tend to have what is called firm ego structures. A person of a firm ego structure is far more difficult to communicate with or persuade than one who has a low self-esteem. I think it is true to say that the Nationalist Party by and large is composed of men and women of firm ego structures. Further, the strongly-held and very stable beliefs of the Dutch Reformed Church tend to maintain and increase these firm ego structures.

People in general are able to bring their perceptions into agreement with their previously existing attitudes because this is far more easily done than it is to adapt their attitudes to agree with a variety of perceptions, sometimes of a conflicting nature. People remember better any facts and information which are in accordance with their beliefs and attitudes, than those items which contradict them. People tend to withdraw themselves even in a *physical* sense from exposure to perceptions which are contradictory to their attitudes.

Dr. Verwey of the N.I.P.R. says: "One further factor helps to ensure that attitudes will remain intact, namely the nature of the social supports which give the attitude its meaning and significance. In discussing the formation of attitudes it has been shown that these come about as a result of the needs of the individual, and in response to the demands of, as well as the perceptions derived from, the environment in which the individual finds himself. In a general sense it may be said that the members of any cultural group will tend to have beliefs and attitudes which are roughly similar in kind and content, although they would vary a great deal in strength. Such attitudes will be preserved partly because the social setting within which they occur supports not only their formation, but also their continuation . . .

The specific need which the attitude serves must be diagnosed. Those who wish to change an attitude frequently believe erroneously that undesirable attitudes are merely the result of obstinacy, or poor training. Another mistake

made is to assume that there is one universal need, which holds equally for all people — e.g. that racial prejudice is the result of economic insecurity. Furthermore, it is more meaningful and practically helpful to interpret an attitude in terms of the immediate, existing psychological field rather than to account for it in terms of historical events — e.g. that the person who has anti-religious attitudes had been forced too much as a child to attend church, or to conform to strict religious precepts.

The content, as well as the nature of the social supports of the attitude must be correctly understood before it can be successfully changed."

Four ways of changing attitudes are suggested by Dr. Verwey. First — lecture methods. But it has been stressed most strongly by the Yale Communication Research Programme team that the communication has a greater effect in producing a change of attitude when its source i.e. the communicator is regarded by subjects as trustworthy and reliable, than when the source is not so regarded. The same applies to the communicator. That proviso is, to my mind, one of the major obstacles in our way when we attempt to hold lectures. Further, it must be remembered that if a communication runs counter to the norms of a group, those persons who value their group membership most highly will be least influenced by the communication.

Mass media of communication is next suggested as a technique for changing attitudes. However, the communication media of radio, magazines, the cinema and in some areas, newspaper are all closed to us.

Thirdly, contacts between groups of differing opinions. Under specific conditions Dr. Verwey says that contact between such groups could perhaps lead to a reduction of prejudice and disagreement. However the majority of studies in this area would seem to indicate that to bring groups into contact is not an effective technique for bringing about changes. (I personally find myself in disagreement with this premise. Surely the best way to know the workings of other groups' minds is to get to know them.) However Dr. Verwey says that co-operation and change of attitude will probably follow only if there is a realisation on both sides that a common goal could not be attained by one group alone. Our goal is very different from the Nationalist one, and of course they are convinced that their me-

thods alone, can secure a peaceful future for this country.

The fourth suggestion — that of group decisions — cannot, I feel be entertained by ourselves. Apparently this procedure has been very effective in changing attitudes to working overtime, change in work procedures and so on, but in the climate of this country such a course is surely impracticable as yet.

Fear is, of course, one of the most potent of motivating appeals, and, together with love and hate, arouses the strongest emotions. There is argument however among the experts as to whether communications containing "emotional" appeals are more effective than communications which rely on "rational" argument. But I think that in this country fear-arousing appeals are, technically speaking, enormously successful. The "swart gevaar" threat never seems to lose its impact, nor do the everlasting diatribes about how South Africa is beset by enemies, terrorists and so forth, and how we must all be prepared to know and face up to our foes etc. (very similar, of course, to the drumming-up type of propaganda pursued by the Communist countries). It is a matter of some surprise to me that people here can happily swallow such remarks day after day, that a state of "subdued tension" can be maintained. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the average White South African has, alas, thought little about the problems which beset us, and so is much more susceptible to "scare" appeals and emotionally loaded messages than those who have greater prior familiarity with the issues.

What can we do about this motivating appeal? It is suggested that in order for opinion changes to result from a verbal or written communication it is probably not sufficient merely to attend to the specific meanings conveyed by the content. Somehow the implications must be thought over and interpreted in relation to one's own goals, values and potential behaviour. It seems quite possible that an "emotional" appeal could have the effect of increasing the incentive to try out new ideas, or to consider the implications of what is being said. Hence such an appeal may sometimes influence the way in which the content is understood and interpreted. Although attention and comprehension may be affected to some degree, the experts think it likely that the effectiveness of an emotional appeal would usually involve increasing the audience's motivation to accept the conclusion.

I think most of us in the Black Sash dislike appealing to the emotions. Our image is perhaps rather that of arid intellectualism. However I must confess that frequently I have found our statements pious, and long-winded. May I suggest that we bear the comments of experts in mind and, even though we may feel we are lowering our own standards, that we try to come down

a little from our intellectual ivory tower and mingle mentally with the plebs a bit more? We want to change opinion, and the opinion we want to change is that of Mr. and Mrs. Average White South African, who probably buys Women's Realm and beat group LPs, not Optima and Amadeus quartet LPs.

Our main task is devoted to counter propaganda. The experts say that a convincing one-sided argument presenting only positive arguments will tend to sway many members of the audience farther in the direction advocated by the communicator. Subsequently however these persons hear the opposite point of view, also supported by cogent-sounding arguments. Their opinions now tend to be swayed back in the negative direction, especially if the new arguments appear to offset the previous positive arguments. However if the initial communication is, instead, a two-sided one, it will already have taken into account both the positive and negative arguments and still have reached the positive conclusion. When the listener is then subsequently exposed to the presentation of negative arguments in the counter-propaganda, he is less likely to be influenced in the negative direction. He is already familiar with the opposing point of view and has been led to the positive conclusion in a context where the negative arguments were in evidence. In effect, he has thus been given an advance basis for ignoring or discounting the negative arguments, and thus "inculcated" will tend to retain the positive conclusion.

Although I have reservations about all this — so much depends, I think, on the intelligence of the audience — this method might be worth trying. Fears of black domination, black misrule, a Congo in South Africa, a truly bloody war of liberation are very real in all circles of White society. I would suggest that we do more in the way of publicly discussing and analysing these fears.

There is just one other point I would like to make. Necessarily the Black Sash always seems to be saying No. . . but constantly saying No does, I think, harm our image. I think we must try, while rightly blasting an abominable bill, to work in somehow what it is that WE want, what WE would approve of, what WE are aiming at. Our aims and objects are regrettably vague and shadowy to the man in the street, and I feel we should seize every opportunity — of which we have many — of hammering home to the public exactly what we are working for. A poster we in the Cape used during the Coloured Cadets Training Bill stand is an example of what I mean. It read: "Compulsory education and equal opportunity: Yes" "Forced labour and summary arrest: NO."

I liked that poster very much — it is positive, a statement of what we believe in, what we hope for. I would like to see more of that type — when it is possible — in future.