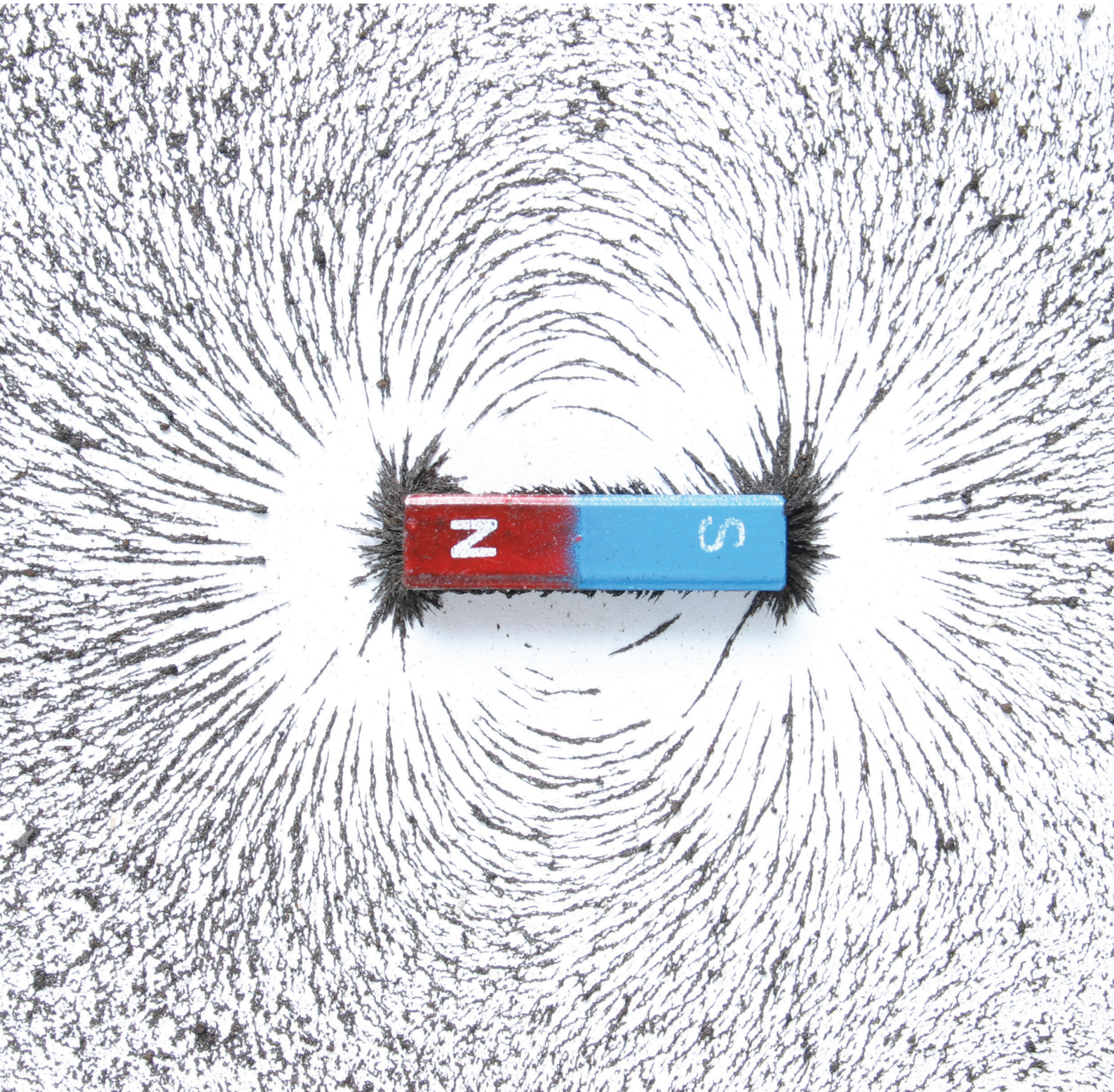


Approaching persuasion as joint problem-solving

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It is no simple task persuading business units to give up relationships with long-term suppliers and begin buying from new approved vendors. Nor is it easy to facilitate alignment among multiple groups – each with very different priorities, goals, concerns and constraints – around the selection of preferred suppliers, or the terms of global contracts. Ironically, even negotiating for time and mindshare from key business unit leaders and staff for the express purpose of soliciting their input and trying to address their needs can be difficult.

Of course, procurement and supply chain groups need to be more than facilitators of alignment and builders of consensus. They also need to drive change and champion enterprise objectives that transcend (and may be in tension with) the goals of particular business units or functional groups. That can be a difficult balance to strike, especially when many sourcing and procurement organizations are struggling to be closer and have stronger relationships with their internal business partners.

In our experience, common influence strategies and tactics often prove inadequate to such complex challenges. Many people naturally approach persuasion as something that is done to others, not a collaborative activity to be engaged in with them. Not surprisingly, most advice about influence consists of techniques for getting others to agree to a preconceived plan or request. When making a recommendation or request, we assume (consciously or not) only two possible responses – agreement or disagreement (yes or no), and therefore create conversations that allow for only two responses. The framing of persuasion as a one-way process reinforces the common but unhelpful tendency to focus only on finding attractive ways of presenting our own ideas, without doing enough to understand others' resistance or to explore alternative solutions. When the stakes are high, when we are confronted with a complex landscape of myriad stakeholders with conflicting interests, and when we need to influence others with whom we will

have ongoing interactions, and thus need to build strong working relationships, a fundamentally different approach to persuasion is called for.

In our work with procurement and supply chain organizations around the world, we have consistently observed three fundamental traps that commonly lie at the root of failed attempts to influence others (see figure 1). Below we describe and diagnose these traps in greater detail, and share three simple but powerful strategies that we have observed, employed ourselves, and coached others to employ, in order to influence others more successfully.

Trap no. 1: Seeking to persuade without being open to persuasion

Recommended strategy: Approach influence as a joint problem-solving activity

Many of us naturally assume that the goal of persuasion is to get our counterpart to agree with whatever we are proposing or requesting. Unfortunately, in many of the complex situations that sourcing and supply chain leaders confront, an assumption that “I have the right answer, and my job is to get you to agree,” is dangerously limiting. There are two problems with this mindset, and the influence tactics that naturally flow from it. First, this attitude almost inevitably leads those who hold it to act in ways that make others feel manipulated or disrespected. The second problem is that such a one-sided approach to persuasion generally forecloses opportunities for learning or jointly developing better solutions.

By contrast, it is far more fruitful to think of influence as a mutual, joint problem-solving activity. Time and again we have observed successful leaders overcome resistance and gain the buy-in of others by re-framing the context from one of selling an idea (or in many cases something more adversarial like a debate or argument), to one of jointly exploring how to address a shared challenge. Such an approach also creates an attractive role for

COMMON INFLUENCE TRAPS

1.	Seeking to persuade without being open to persuasion
2.	Relying primarily on efforts to prove when attempting to persuade
3.	Failing to view the world through the eyes of those we are seeking to influence

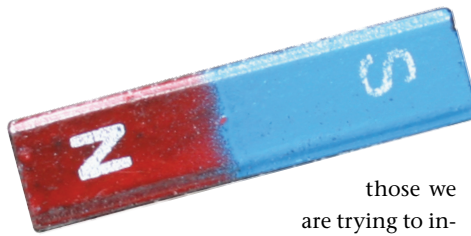
Figure 1.

Influence and persuasion have become essential competencies for procurement and supply chain managers and professionals. Whether it is leading a new sourcing initiative, trying to maximize compliance with existing supply agreements, or driving organizational change around a new supplier relationship management program, the ability to persuade and to build and maintain alignment amongst internal stakeholders is critical. Moreover, with much of the low-hanging fruit available through traditional competitive bidding already picked, and as the need to reduce supply chain risk and foster innovation with suppliers rise to the top of the procurement agenda, influence has also become an indispensable strategy and skill for external negotiations with suppliers.

CONTRASTING CASE STUDIES

Consider the example of Brian, the head of a newly-formed central sourcing organization at a major consumer products company. He and his team were completely deadlocked with the heads of two business units. Tasked with consolidating the company's supply base and reducing a supply-chain with over 5000 suppliers to one with 1000 or fewer, Brian's team performed a thorough analysis and selected approximately 3800 suppliers to cut. Brian personally spent many late nights refining a detailed business case and carefully crafting a series of arguments to persuade business unit leadership of the merits of his proposal. Eight weeks later, after countless meetings and despite having answered every concern and countered every objection, resistance had only become more entrenched.

Now consider a similar situation at another multinational company. Shortly after she was tasked with consolidating the enterprise's suppliers, Maria, the head of corporate procurement, met with the heads of each of the company's business units. She explained the mandate she had been given, and asked for their help in determining what criteria should be used to evaluate suppliers and decide which to cut. She also asked for their help in brainstorming ways to manage the risks of consolidation. In addition, while acknowledging the pressure she was under to deliver savings to the enterprise, she also asked for advice on how the consolidation might be pursued in ways that would deliver additional operational benefits to their businesses. The process of gaining alignment was difficult and at times contentious, but by enlisting line executives as partners in solving a complex problem, rather than trying to push a solution and persuade them to accept it, Maria was successful in implementing a consolidation effort with widespread buy-in – one that reflected robust and creative thinking from executives whose organizations depended heavily on having strong relationships with the right suppliers.



those we are trying to influence, namely as partners in addressing the issues at hand – rather than objects of manipulation. By creating opportunities for stakeholders to share their ideas and perspectives, and see those reflected in the ultimate solution, a joint problem-solving approach to influence increases the likelihood of genuine stakeholder buy-in, and thus successful adoption and implementation of new plans or policies.

Trap no. 2: Relying primarily on efforts to prove when attempting to persuade

Recommended strategy: Seek to understand before seeking to be understood

Argumentative models of persuasion saturate most areas of our lives. From political debates, to our adversarial justice system, to the way the media covers key issues, we observe efforts to persuade that are founded on an attempt to marshal data that support one point of view, while developing arguments to undermine alternative perspectives. So it is hardly surprising that we see exactly the same methodology employed in the workplace. People develop complicated business cases and PowerPoint decks to advocate for their preferred solutions (often ignoring or glossing over any holes in the logic or data behind their conclusions). When they do bother to ask a question, the questions are typically designed to expose holes in the reasoning of others. One of our clients has coined a term to describe this behavior – “the collective monologue” – a mode of interaction that occurs when two or more executives get into a conversation where each party focuses on defending their own views and attacking the views of others, and no one spends any time trying to understand, much less learn from, other perspectives.

Ironically, we are usually least persuasive when we are most emphatic in defending our own views and attacking the views of others. By glossing over any uncertainties or gaps in our own reasoning (in almost any reasonably complex situation some gaps or uncertainties exist), we diminish our overall credibility, thus inadvertently undermining even our strongest arguments. Furthermore, an ar-

gumentative style of persuasion triggers actually makes it more difficult for others to agree with us, because doing so has been implicitly framed as defeat, as an acknowledgement of error, and a loss of face.

Being persuasive in the face of strong resistance often requires just the opposite approach. Rather than hide the gaps in our arguments, we need to highlight them. We need to expose our entire chain of reasoning and invite challenge at every level, from the facts we are considering, to the assumptions we are making, to the inferences we draw. In so doing, we are far more likely to be credible, to create a conversation where others can truly stop and listen to what we are saying, and to create opportunities for learning. At the same time, such an approach is more likely to defuse the ego-driven, anti-learning defenses triggered by more argumentative approaches.

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essential to ask questions that are based on genuine curiosity about how and why someone may see a situation very differently than we do. As long as we assume in our heart of hearts that those who are resisting a new supply chain initiative are motivated solely by a desire for unilateral control, or protecting their turf, or just because they are too stubborn or stupid to understand why our proposal is the most sensible approach, it is unlikely we will ever be successful in influencing them.

To be persuasive, it is essential that we ourselves remain open to persuasion (after all, when was the last time someone convinced you by simply advocating for their point of view and being unwilling to listen to your perspective?). A useful technique is to acknowledge the validity of other perspectives (or at least the specific elements that strike us as reasonable, or even compelling – even if we don't

share them) before advocating for our own views. By doing so, we avoid the common trap of assuming a binary choice between agreeing that someone's ideas are correct, or attacking them (the ideas, or the person, or both) as foolish or unreasonable.

Not only is it important to carefully acknowledge what strikes us as having merit in the views of those with whom we disagree, it is also critical to share very explicitly how and why we see things differently. This last point is crucial. Too many of us try to gain a hearing for our views by faking respect for different viewpoints. We trot out formulaic phrases like "Horatio has a good point, but..." and then proceed to articulate our opinion in a way that makes it obvious that we think there was nothing of merit in Horatio's perspective.

Such behavior is based on a correct intuition about human psychology – that demonstrating respect for the views of others often leads to more openness and less defensiveness, and therefore is a critical ingredient in an effective influence repertoire. But insincere attempts at manipulation, no matter how skillfully we think we are in employing them, are almost never effective. In reality, it is very difficult to be influential without a genuine respect for, and curiosity about, the different views of others. Persuading others requires us to do the hard work of articulating specifically how and why we see at least some elements of their argument as persuasive or at least reasonable, even as we reach a different conclusion about the situation.

Trap no. 3: Failing to view the world through the eyes of those we are seeking to influence
Recommended strategy: Actively and respectfully explore concerns and resistance

When trying to persuade a business unit to shift spend to a new preferred supplier, or a key supplier to share detailed financial information to enable joint should-cost analysis, most of us naturally begin by thinking of all the reasons the other party (or parties) should agree. Indeed, we may well come up with a number of reasons why it is really in the other side's best interest to say yes, or why it would be foolish of them to say no. Sometimes this works. The trouble begins in those situations when the other side says no. Perhaps the other person is not a team player, or they are short-sighted and

don't yet really understand what is in their long-term interest. Faced with resistance to what seems eminently sensible or fair to us, the natural human tendency is to assume, at some level, that the other side is self-serving, ill informed, or even a bit irrational.

So, we redouble our efforts to come up with more reasons why the other party should say yes, and additional explanations of why they would be unwise to say no – and more compelling and persuasive ways of articulating our reasoning. We handle their objections and explain away

A joint problem-solving approach to persuasion, by contrast, leads us to dig into the stated (and unstated) concerns or objections of the person we are trying to influence. To change someone's mind, we must first understand where their mind is at

their concerns. Unfortunately, such common techniques, even if skillfully employed, often have the unintended consequence of leading others to feel unheard and disrespected.

A joint problem-solving approach to

persuasion, by contrast, leads us to dig into the stated (and unstated) concerns or objections of the person we are trying to influence. To change someone's mind, we must first understand where their mind is at. Engaging and exploring resistance is somewhat counter-intuitive and often feels risky or uncomfortable, but in the end it enables us to better understand the underlying needs and concerns of others, and enables us to re-craft our proposals or requests in ways that make agreement more likely.

In reality, to change someone's mind, we must first understand where their mind is at engaging and exploring resistance is somewhat counter-intuitive and often feels risky or uncomfortable, but by enabling us to better understand the underlying needs and concerns of others, it often facilitates the identification or development of alternative solutions that are more easily accepted by others, while still enabling us to achieve our objectives.

A useful way to codify this thought process is to systematically consider all the possible reasons, from the other side's perspective, why saying "no" would be reasonable and justifiable. The mental exercise of trying to understand (actual or potential) resistance as founded in reasonable and valid concerns or unmet needs provide important information for

ILLUSTRATIVE ANALYSIS OF STAKEHOLDER CONCERNS ABOUT SWITCHING SUPPLIERS

Consequences of saying "yes"	Consequences of saying "no"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I lose a valuable relationship with my current supplier - My group has to spend time getting the new supplier up to speed - Some of the cost savings that procurement expects will accrue to Corporate, but all of the cost and risk will be borne by my business unit - Quality will suffer, both as the old supplier loses motivation, and as the new supplier gets up to speed - A precedent will be set that Corporate Procurement calls the shots on supplier selection – if this doesn't work, my unit suffers; if I can make it work, I'll just succeed in making the case for more Corporate meddling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + I maintain my relationship with a valued, reliable supplier + My group's productivity won't suffer during a complicated transition period + My business continues to be a priority with a supplier that views us as a key account – service will be good and issues will be resolved quickly and easily + I won't need to have any uncomfortable conversations disengaging with my current supplier + I avoid complaints and morale issues with my team, all of whom like working with our current supplier + I set a precedent that our business unit drives supplier selection AND + I can always say yes later

Figure 2.

Limiting assumptions	Common traps
My goal when persuading others, and the way I can be most helpful and effective, is to help them see and acknowledge the validity of my point of view.	Seeking to persuade without being open to persuasion
I have all the facts I need and I understand the complete picture. Disagreement indicates that others are wrong or that they do not see the situation as clearly as I do. If I articulate my perspective or position clearly and forcefully enough, I'll get others to "see the light" and agree.	Relying primarily on efforts to prove when attempting to persuade
Given the above, if others continue to disagree or choose to do something other than what I am suggesting, they must be irrational, stupid, or motivated by purely selfish considerations.	Failing to view the world through the eyes of those we are seeking to influence

Figure 3.

moving into joint problem solving. A simple way to ensure robust analysis is to do a somewhat counter-intuitive balance sheet (see figure 2) – anticipating and/or diagnosing resistance from two perspectives: (1) the downsides of saying “yes” to what you are proposing or requesting, as perceived by the party or parties you are seeking to influence, and (2) the perceived upsides, from their perspective, of saying “no.”

It is important (though not always easy) to avoid being distracted by the fact that we may not agree with many of the concerns we uncover. The first priority is to discover how others see the world, and to develop an empathetic understanding of their resistance. Such efforts not only uncover information that enables more effective influence and problem-solving, it demonstrates a genuine concern and respect for others – which in turn creates a more receptive audience for virtually any proposal or request.

Cultivating an influential mindset

These strategies may sound simple, and to a large degree they are. Nonetheless, it is when these approaches to influence are most needed that they are often most difficult to put into practice. In a fast-paced, results-oriented business environment, smart, experienced people too often see their job as figuring out the right answer, and then getting others to agree. No tactic or technique is likely to help us when we confront resistance in such a frame of mind (see figure 3).

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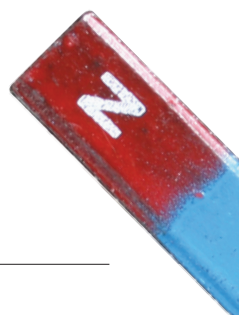
Instead, enhancing our ability to influence others depends in large part on changing deeply engrained assumptions about influence, and beginning to view both ourselves, and others, in a new and different light (see figure 4).

As sourcing and procurement organizations continue to evolve from their roots in tactical purchasing to increasingly strategic roles within the enterprise, influence skills – and the ability to lead change and build alignment among mul-

More empowering assumptions	More effective influence strategies
I can be most effective by understanding and leveraging the perspectives of others – regardless of how unconstructively their views may be expressed.	Approach influence as a joint problem-solving activity
A complex situation can generally be interpreted in several valid ways, since the involved parties almost certainly have access to, and focus on, different information. In order to come to a good solution, I need to be able to understand the views of others who disagree with me.	Seek to understand before seeking to be understood
People tend to do (a) what is in their best interest and (b) what seems reasonable and justified to them.	Actively and respectfully explore concerns and resistance

Figure 4.

multiple stakeholders – will only become more important. It is therefore crucial for leaders and professionals within these groups to develop and employ sophisticated influence strategies and skills.





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