

Change the Way You Persuade

by Gary A. Williams and Robert B. Miller



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Managers typically use a one-size-fits-all approach when trying to influence their bosses and colleagues. New research shows that's a mistake. Persuasion works best when it's tailored to five distinct decision-making styles.

CHANGE THE WAY YOU PERSUADE

by Gary A. Williams and Robert B. Miller

IT'S HAPPENED TO YOU BEFORE. You call a meeting to try to convince your boss and peers that your company needs to make an important move—for instance, funding a risky but promising venture. Your argument is impassioned, your logic unassailable, your data bulletproof. Two weeks later, though, you learn that your brilliant proposal has been tabled. What went wrong?

All too often, people make the mistake of focusing too much on the content of their argument and not enough on how they deliver that message. Indeed, far too many decisions go the wrong way because information is presented ineffectively. In our experience, people can vastly improve their chances of having their proposals succeed by determining who the chief decision maker is among the executives they are trying to persuade and then tailoring their arguments to that business leader's decision-making style.

Specifically, we have found that executives typically fall into one of five decision-making categories: *Charismatics* can be initially exuberant about a new idea or proposal but will yield a final decision based on a balanced set of information. *Thinkers* can exhibit contradictory points

of view within a single meeting and need to cautiously work through all the options before coming to a decision. *Skeptics* remain highly suspicious of data that don't fit with their worldview and make decisions based on their gut feelings. *Followers* make decisions based on how other trusted executives, or they themselves, have made similar decisions in the past. And *controllers* focus on the pure facts and analytics of a decision because of their own fears and uncertainties.

The five styles span a wide range of behaviors and characteristics. Controllers, for instance, have a strong aversion to risk; charismatics tend to seek it out. Despite such differences, people frequently use a one-size-fits-all approach when trying to convince their bosses, peers, and staff. They argue their case to a thinker the same way they would to a skeptic. Instead, managers should tailor their presentations to the executives they are trying to persuade, using the right buzzwords to deliver the appropriate information in the most effective sequence and format. After all, Bill Gates does not make decisions in the same way that Larry Ellison does. And knowing that can make a huge difference.

Five Approaches

Executives make it to the senior level largely because they are effective decision makers. Learning mostly from experience, they build a set of criteria that guides them. Each decision is influenced by both reason and emotion, but the weight given to each of these elements during the decision-making process can vary widely depending on the person.

In a two-year project, we studied the decision-making styles of more than 1,600 executives across a wide range of industries. Our work focused on how those people made purchasing decisions, but we contend that the results have broader applicability to decision making in general. We interviewed participants about various facets of their decision-making processes. For instance, how strong was their desire to have others educate them about the issues involved in a particular decision? How willing were they to move beyond the status quo? How much risk were they comfortable with in making the decision? These characteristics and preferences are often set early in a businessperson's career and evolve based on experience. In other words, people have a natural tendency toward a certain style of decision making that gets reinforced through successes—or that changes after repeated failures.

Our research should not be confused with standard personality tests and indicators like Myers-Briggs. Our framework is simply a categorization of how people tend to make decisions. Of course, people do not always make decisions in the same way; much depends on the situation they're in. But our research has shown that when it comes to making tough, high-stakes choices that involve many complex considerations and serious consequences, people tend to resort to a single, dominant style. Call it a default mode of decision making.

In this article, we describe each of the five decision-making styles in detail. This information is intended to be neither exhaustive nor definitive, and most executives will exhibit only some of the traits we list. Nevertheless, knowing the general characteristics of the different styles can help you better tailor your presentations and arguments to your audience. Unfortunately, many people fail in this

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Five Styles of Decision Making—

In our research, we found that executives typically have a default style of decision making that lands them in one of five distinct categories: charismatics, thinkers, skeptics, followers, and controllers.

From January 1999 to June 2001, we and our colleagues at Miller-Williams surveyed 1,684 executives to study their decision-making processes. The participants were from a range of industries (including automotive, retail, and

Charismatics	
Description	Charismatics account for 25% of all the executives we polled. They are easily intrigued and enthralled by new ideas, but experience has taught them to make final decisions based on balanced information, not just emotions.
Typical Characteristics	enthusiastic, captivating, talkative, dominant
Prominent Examples	Richard Branson, Lee Iacocca, Herb Kelleher
Buzzwords to Use	results, proven, actions, show, watch, easy, clear, focus
Bottom Line	When trying to persuade a charismatic, fight the urge to join in his excitement. Focus the discussion on results. Make simple and straightforward arguments, and use visual aids to stress the features and benefits of your proposal.

and the Ways to Influence Each

high tech) and were interviewed by e-mail, in person, or over the telephone. The participants described their decision-making tendencies for our researchers—for instance, how long it took them to make a decision; their willingness to make a choice that might have negative consequences; their desire for others to educate them about the issues involved; and so on.

We performed a cluster analysis of these data and found that the executives' behaviors fell

into the five groupings described below. The accuracy of the survey results reported in this article—for example, that 25% of the executives we interviewed were charismatics—is plus or minus 2.9%. For many of the prominent CEO examples cited, the categorizations are based on our firsthand observations and experiences with those executives; other categorizations are based on secondary sources, including media accounts.

Thinkers	Skeptics	Followers	Controllers
Thinkers account for 11% of the executives we surveyed and can be the toughest executives to persuade. They are impressed with arguments that are supported by data. They tend to have a strong aversion to risk and can be slow to make a decision.	Skeptics account for 19% of the executives we polled. They tend to be highly suspicious of every data point presented, especially any information that challenges their worldview. They often have an aggressive, almost combative style and are usually described as take-charge people.	Followers account for 36% of all the executives we surveyed. They make decisions based on how they've made similar choices in the past or on how other trusted executives have made them. They tend to be risk-averse.	Controllers account for 9% of the executives we interviewed. They abhor uncertainty and ambiguity, and they will focus on the pure facts and analytics of an argument.
cerebral, intelligent, logical, academic	demanding, disruptive, disagreeable, rebellious	responsible, cautious, brand-driven, bargain-conscious	logical, unemotional, sensible, detail-oriented, accurate, analytical
Michael Dell, Bill Gates, Katharine Graham	Steve Case, Larry Ellison, Tom Siebel	Peter Coors, Douglas Daft, Carly Fiorina	Jacques Nasser, Ross Perot, Martha Stewart
quality, academic, think, numbers, intelligent, plan, expert, proof	feel, grasp, power, action, suspect, trust, demand, disrupt	innovate, expedite, expertise, similar to, previous	details, facts, reason, logic, power, handle, physical, grab, just do it
Have lots of data ready. Thinkers need as much information as possible, including all pertinent market research, customer surveys, case studies, cost-benefit analyses, and so on. They want to understand all perspectives of a given situation.	You need as much credibility as you can garner. If you haven't established enough clout with a skeptic, you need to find a way to have it transferred to you prior to or during the meeting—for example, by gaining an endorsement from someone the skeptic trusts.	Followers tend to focus on proven methods; references and testimonials are big persuading factors. They need to feel certain that they are making the right decision—specifically, that others have succeeded in similar initiatives.	Your argument needs to be structured and credible. The controller wants details, but only if presented by an expert. Don't be too aggressive in pushing your proposal. Often, your best bet is to simply give him the information he needs and hope that he will convince himself.

regard. In our experience, more than half of all sales presentations are mismatched to the decision maker's style. Specifically, close to 80% of all sales presentations focus on skeptics and controllers, but those two groups accounted for just 28% of the executives we surveyed.

To investigate the various subtleties of the five decision-making styles, we present the following hypothetical situation. In each of the subsequent sections devoted to explaining the categories, we will use this tale to demonstrate how our fictional protagonist should best argue her case to her CEO.

MaxPro is a leading manufacturer of office equipment, including printers, photocopiers, and fax machines. The company has a centralized structure, with the bulk of its marketing and sales operations located at corporate headquarters. Mary Flood, the executive vice president of sales and marketing, knows she must restructure her operations to become more customer focused. Specifically, she needs to form major-account teams at the regional level instead of at the corporate level. All national accounts and targeted marketing would be based in one of five regions (Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, and West), each run by a different vice president. In Flood's plan, account executives for MaxPro's major customers (clients with revenues over \$50 million) would relocate near the headquarters of those companies and would report directly to their respective regional VP. Each region would have its own marketing team and distribution channels, leaving corporate marketing responsible just for brand development. Flood needs to persuade George Nolan, MaxPro's CEO, to approve these changes.

1. Charismatics

Charismatics (25% of all the executives we interviewed) are easily enthralled by new ideas. They can absorb large amounts of information rapidly, and they tend to process the world visually.

They want to move quickly from the big idea to the specifics—especially those details regarding implementation. Charismatics are often described as enthusiastic, captivating, talkative, dominant, and persistent. They are risk-seeking yet responsible individuals. They are impressed with intelligence and facts and not usually given to self-absorption and compulsiveness. Prominent examples of charismatics include Richard Branson, Lee Iacocca, Herb Kelleher, and Oprah Winfrey. (Note that many of the categorizations of the executives we cite in this article are based on our firsthand observations and experiences with them. Some are based on secondary sources, including media accounts.)

Although charismatics may show great exuberance for a new idea, getting a final commitment from them can be difficult. They've learned from experience—particularly from the bad decisions they've made—to temper their initial enthusiasm with a good dose of reality. They seek out facts to support their emotions, and if such data can't be found, they will quickly lose their enthusiasm for an idea. Furthermore, charismatics prefer arguments that are tied directly to bottom-line results and are particularly keen on proposals that will make their company more competitive. They are rarely convinced by one-sided arguments that lack a strong orientation toward results. At the end of the day, charismatics make their final decisions very methodically, and the decisions are based on balanced information.

When trying to persuade a charismatic, you need to fight the urge to join in his excitement. One approach is to slightly undersell the parts of your proposal that pique his interest. In other words, you should be prepared to merely acknowledge the items that he greets with enthusiasm and discuss the risks of each of those things. This will ground your proposal in reality and strengthen his confidence and trust in you. You also need to keep the discussion focused on results. Your arguments must be simple and straightforward, and you should use visual aids to stress the features and benefits of your proposal. If you don't provide this results-oriented information (even when it's not asked for), you risk that the charismatic will not have it later when he needs it. Furthermore, you should be very honest and up-front about the risks involved with accepting your proposal, while also delineating the measures that can help minimize those risks. If you try to conceal any potential downsides, you can be sure that the charismatic will discover them later—when you're not available to address any concerns he may have.

All executives are busy people, but the attention span of a charismatic can be particularly short. In a meeting, you need to start with the most critical information. Otherwise, you risk losing his attention if you take your time leading up to a crucial point. Even if you have a two-hour meeting scheduled, you might not get through your entire presentation. Charismatics disdain canned arguments and will often interrupt you to get to the bottom line. Indeed, charismatics prefer highly interactive meetings; at times, they will want to move around the room and take control of the discussion.

Although charismatics might appear to be independent thinkers, they often rely on other high-profile executives in the company when making major decisions. Addressing this tendency will help increase your chances of success. Also critical will be your quiet perseverance: Charismatics expect you to wait patiently for them to make a decision, which could take some time, even though their initial enthusiasm may have led you to be-

lieve otherwise. Buzzwords that can help hold a charismatic's interest include: results, proven, actions, show, watch, look, bright, easy, clear, and focus.

Persuasion in Practice: **Nolan the Charismatic**

Flood has scheduled an hour-long meeting with Nolan and the other members of the senior executive committee to discuss her proposed reorganization. Before that day, she previews her recommendations with COO Jack Warniers, Nolan's most trusted lieutenant. Warniers has several concerns about the restructuring, which Flood addresses and resolves through follow-up memos and e-mails.

Flood has prepared a few charts for the meeting, but these are merely for her own reference. Because she wants Nolan to feel like he can steer the discussion any which way, she will modify the charts in her head as necessary and redraw the information on a white board. Flood also knows that Nolan will at some point need all the details of the implementation – most of this information won't be discussed in the meeting – so she prepares a full report that she will give him afterward.

Flood starts her presentation by drawing a diagram that shows the current organization and its problems. Then she immediately jumps into her recommendations with a chart that outlines the new structure and how it will solve those problems. She emphasizes how the reorganization will increase MaxPro's overall competitiveness. "The restructuring," she says, "will help us to better focus on our customers, and the result will be fewer defections, particularly among our important accounts." She delineates how the reorganization will help propel MaxPro ahead of the competition.

Flood's ideas initially appeal to Nolan, who likes bold, out-of-the-box solutions, and he starts talking about the new restructuring as if it's already been accomplished. To keep him grounded, Flood outlines the potential impact of the new structure. Specifically, she notes the cost of relocating staff and the strong possibility that the change will meet fierce resistance from several groups, including the IT division, which would be responsible for supporting a large number of employees in remote locations.

Next, Flood presents a detailed risk assessment of the implementation – what will happen if the reorganization fails and the steps the company can take to minimize those risks. This information is as much for Nolan as it is for the others in the company who will be charged with implementing the plan. She then talks about the risk of doing nothing by highlighting evidence that at least three of MaxPro's major customers are already considering switching to a competitor because they are dissatisfied with MaxPro's customer service.

Knowing that the charismatic Nolan will want to move forward quickly, Flood ends her presentation by asking what their next steps should be. Nolan requests a detailed schedule, with milestone dates, of how the reorganization might progress. "I thought you might be interested in that information," she says, "so I've included it in this report, along with supporting data

from the research we've conducted so far, case studies of similar reorganizations at other companies, and other pertinent facts. In particular, you might want to look at the section on risk assessment." Flood also tells Nolan that there are two versions of the report: an executive summary and an in-depth analysis. That night, on a red-eye flight to the East Coast, Nolan starts thinking about Flood's proposal and begins wondering how the restructuring will affect MaxPro's biggest customers. He turns to her report and finds that information in the table "Impact on Our Ten Largest Customers."

2. Thinkers

Thinkers (11% of the executives we interviewed) are the most difficult decision makers to understand and consequently the toughest to persuade.

They are often described as cerebral, intelligent, logical, and academic. Typically, they are voracious readers and selective about the words they use. They are impressed with arguments that are quantitative and supported by data. Not usually known for their social skills, thinkers tend to guard their emotions. They have two strong visceral desires in business – to anticipate change and to win – and they often pride themselves on their ability to outthink and outmaneuver the competition. They are driven more by the need to retain control than by the need to innovate. Prominent examples include Michael Dell, Bill Gates, Katharine Graham, and Alan Greenspan.

Thinkers have a strong desire for comparative data, which can make it difficult to persuade them. To make a decision, they need as much information as possible, including all pertinent market research, customer surveys, case studies, cost-benefit analyses, and so on. Perhaps the single-most important piece of information thinkers need is the presenter's methodology for getting from point A to point B. They strive to understand all perspectives of a given situation. And, unlike charismatics, thinkers have a strong aversion to risk.

When trying to persuade thinkers, your best approach is to openly communicate your worries and concerns about your proposal, because thinkers work best when they know the risks up front. Often they will ask a battery of questions to explore and understand all the risks associated with an option. Thinkers can be swayed when the arguments and presentation appeal directly to their intelligence. Interestingly, their thought process is very selective but not always completely methodical. They will, for instance, sometimes circumvent their own decision-making processes if they feel a bargain – a relatively low-risk opportunity to save time or money – is in their best interest.

Thinkers will never forget a bad experience, so you need to make sure that your recommendations to them are truly the best options. (Of course, you should do this for any of the five types of decision makers, but particularly so with thinkers.) And anyway, thinkers will eventually figure out for themselves whether something was truly the best alternative, so you might be better off refraining from drawing conclusions for them. Otherwise you'll risk being seen as too helpful and potentially not credible. One effective strategy for persuading thinkers is to give them ample time and space to come to their own conclusions.

In a meeting, thinkers will often take contradictory points of view. This can be extremely confusing, but remember that thinkers do not like to show their cards up front, so expect that you may not be able to discern how they feel about any of the options you present. In fact, thinkers often do not reveal their intentions until they render their final decisions. Furthermore, they can be self-absorbed, so be prepared for silence as they digest the information you've given them. Buzzwords and phrases that will capture a thinker's attention include: quality, academic, think, numbers, makes sense, intelligent, plan, expert, competition, and proof.

Persuasion in Practice: **Nolan the Thinker**

To convince Nolan, Flood knows she must present as many data, facts, and figures as possible, so her strategy is to deliver that information in huge chunks over a long-enough period of time for him to absorb and make sense of everything. Consequently, she decides that her best approach is to present her argument over the course of two meetings.

In the first, she begins by making her best case for why MaxPro needs to restructure. She emphasizes that if things stay the same, MaxPro will likely lose customers to competitors. (Interestingly, this piece of information – the risk of doing nothing – would be one of the last things she would present to Nolan if he were a charismatic. In fact, the order of presentation to a thinker is almost exactly the reverse order of presentation to a charismatic.)

Flood then explains how she arrived at the three options she has proposed for the restructuring. She details the methodology she used to gather and assess the data, and Nolan is quick to point out where she may have missed certain steps or made incorrect assumptions. This will benefit Flood in the long run, because Nolan is now taking ownership of her methodology.

Next, Flood highlights the pros and cons of each option, and she presents case studies of similar restructurings, including those from other industries and from different time periods. The case studies represent roughly an equal number of successes and failures. Flood points out why each was successful or why each failed, and from that she begins to write on a white board a list of reorganizing dos and don'ts, to which Nolan is quick to add his input.

Throughout her presentation, Flood is undaunted by Nolan's barrage of questions. She knows it's not a personal attack; it's an attack on her process or data. Flood is very up-front about where her data might be inconclusive or conflicting, where she's made assumptions using just her intuition, and areas where her argument is weak. Together, she and Nolan pick through the presentation. For one risk assessment that Flood has weighted as 60-40, for example, Nolan says it should be 50-50.

At the end of the first meeting, Flood draws up a to-do list that indicates where she needs to plug in more data or fill in gaps in her argument before the next meeting; Nolan helps her prioritize the list. In several instances, however, he says, "Well, I don't think we can get good data here, so let's just go by gut feel."

During the second meeting, Flood briefly summarizes what they discussed previously – with all the corrections and adjustments that Nolan has requested. Knowing that he hates surprises, she clearly points out anything new and different from the first presentation – for example, revised data. Next, using the updated information, she explains how she arrived at the optimum restructuring that maximizes the probability of success while keeping risks to an acceptable level. In conclusion, she shows the projected financial costs and additional revenues that the change will likely generate. After the meeting, Flood is prepared to wait weeks, if not months, for Nolan's decision.

3. Skeptics

Skeptics (19% of the executives we polled) are highly suspicious of every single data point, especially any information that challenges their worldview.

Perhaps the most defining trait of skeptics is that they tend to have very strong personalities. They can be demanding, disruptive, disagreeable, rebellious, and even antisocial. They may have an aggressive, almost combative style and are usually described as take-charge people. They tend to be self-absorbed and act primarily on their feelings. Prominent examples include Steve Case, Larry Ellison, and Tom Siebel.

During your presentation, a skeptic may get up and leave temporarily, take a phone call, or even carry on a side conversation for an extended period of time. He will be demanding of both your time and energy, locking horns with you whenever the opportunity arises. The thinker launches a volley of questions, and it is not personal; with a skeptic, it is. Do not let it get to you; just go through your presentation coolly and logically. The good news is that you will know almost immediately where you stand with skeptics. You can almost always depend on them to tell you what they are thinking because of their strong personalities.

To persuade a skeptic, you need as much credibility as you can garner. Skeptics tend to trust people who are similar to them—for instance, people who went to the same college or worked for the same companies. If you haven't established credibility with a skeptic, you need to find a way to have it transferred to you prior to or during the meeting—for example, by gaining an endorsement from someone the skeptic trusts. Doing this will let the skeptic maintain his superior position while allowing you to openly discuss issues on his level. Credibility can be transferred (from a colleague, for instance), but ultimately it must be earned, and you may have to go through some very aggressive questioning to establish it.

Challenging a skeptic is risky and must be handled delicately. Sometimes, to make your case, you will need to correct bad information that the skeptic is relying on. If, for instance, the skeptic states incorrectly that your company's R&D costs have been spiraling out of control recently, you might reply, "Are you testing me? Because I remember you telling me a couple months ago that we need to spend more to regain our leadership in developing innovative products. But maybe that's changed?" In other words, when you need to correct a skeptic, give him room to save face. For him to trust you, he needs to maintain his reputation and ego. And remember that skeptics do not like being helped; they prefer having people think they know something already.

Although persuading a skeptic might sound daunting, the process is actually very straightforward. Skeptics want to move forward with groundbreaking ideas, but they first need to make sure that those ideas are from people they fully trust. Skeptics usually make decisions quickly—within days, if not right on the spot. Buzzwords to use with a skeptic include: feel, grasp, power, action, suspect, trust, agreeable, demand, and disrupt.

Persuasion in Practice: **Nolan the Skeptic**

Flood knows that she lacks the necessary clout to make her pitch directly to Nolan. So she enlists the aid of COO Jack Warniers, whom Nolan trusts. After she obtains Warniers's buy-in, she asks him to copresent the idea with her, hoping that his credibility will add to hers. They agree beforehand that Warniers will deliver all key messages, including the proposed restructuring and any data that might be controversial.

At the meeting, Flood and Warniers make their arguments in roughly the same order they would if Nolan were a thinker instead of a skeptic, but they emphasize the credibility of all their information sources. Flood knows that Nolan needs to hear things from multiple reputable sources—the more the better. So when discussing a recent marketing survey, she says, "I took the liberty of arranging a call between you and several other local market-research experts to discuss these results in greater detail." Whenever Nolan challenges anything, Flood and Warniers work quickly to ease his discomfort. Knowing that Nolan respects Bill

Gates, for example, Flood softens one of Nolan's attacks by saying, "I see your point, but you probably remember that Microsoft made a similar move about two years ago."

At every turn, Flood and Warniers are careful to tread lightly around Nolan's ego. When discussing the case studies, for instance, they introduce each one by saying, "You've probably seen this before..." or "As you know, Hewlett-Packard failed in a similar restructuring because..." For each example, Flood and Warniers are quick to point out whether the company's image and reputation were enhanced or degraded as a result of the restructuring.

Because Nolan is particularly skeptical of anything abstract, Flood and Warniers are careful to make their arguments as concrete as possible, usually by grounding them in the real world. When they talk about relocating 200 employees, for example, they try to include the specifics: "We would need to close our building here on Hunter Avenue and sublease the space, including the adjacent parking lot. Because the building has a modular, funky layout, we might consider turning it into a business incubator."

At the end of their presentation, Flood and Warniers appeal to Nolan's rebellious streak by stating how the proposed reorganization would buck the trend in their industry. They also are quick to credit Nolan for inspiring the idea. "At the last meeting of the senior executive committee," Warniers says, "you talked about how we needed to ensure that we didn't lose touch with our customers. Your comment started us thinking about this restructuring." Flood and Warniers end their presentation with their proposed action plan for the reorganization, complete with a schedule of milestones. At that point, Nolan takes charge of the discussion.

4. Followers

Followers (36% of the executives we interviewed) make decisions based on how they've made similar choices in the past or on how other trusted executives have made them.

Because they are afraid of making the wrong choice, followers will seldom be early adopters. Instead, they trust in known brands and in bargains, both of which represent less risk. They are also very good at seeing the world through other people's eyes. Interestingly, despite their cautiousness, followers can be spontaneous at times. Above all, though, they are responsible decision makers, which is why they are most often found in large corporations. In fact, followers account for more than a third of all the executives we surveyed, representing the largest group among the five types of decision makers. Prominent examples include Peter Coors, Douglas Daft, and Carly Fiorina.

Followers may engage you in long lists of issues and repeatedly challenge your position (similar to what a skeptic does), but don't be fooled. In the end, they will agree to something only if they've seen it done elsewhere. But followers won't admit this. In fact, they will seldom concede that they are followers; they would much rather have you believe that they are innovative and forward thinking. Frequently, followers are mistaken for skeptics. However, followers are not inherently suspicious; they prefer that you help them gain a better grasp of what they don't understand. And although followers may exhibit a take-charge approach, they will yield when challenged. (As a general rule, people who are difficult to classify into a decision-making style are usually followers, because people in the other four groups tend to show their characteristics more definitively.)

Although followers are often the most difficult to identify, they can be the easiest to persuade – if you know which buttons to push. To obtain buy-in from a follower, you need to make him feel confident about deciding to move in a certain direction by proving that others have succeeded on that path. Not surprisingly, followers tend to focus on proven methods, and references and testimonials are big persuading factors.

With a follower, don't try to sell yourself unless you have a strong track record of success. Instead, look for past decisions by the follower that support your views or find similar decisions by other executives the follower trusts. Ideally, followers want solutions that are innovative yet proven, new but trusted, leading-edge yet somewhat safe. At the end of the day, though, what followers need most is to know that they won't lose their jobs. This is why they rarely make out-of-the-box decisions. In fact, for some followers, the only way to persuade them to adopt a truly bold strategy is to get someone else to do it successfully first. Buzzwords and phrases to use with a follower include: innovate, expedite, swift, bright, just like before, expertise, similar to, previous, what works, and old way.

Persuasion in Practice: **Nolan the Follower**

Flood knows that her mission is simple: She must make Nolan feel comfortable that the decision to restructure has minimal risk. And to seal the deal, she must somehow also make him feel that he is being innovative.

In the meeting, Flood presents her arguments in roughly the same order that she would if Nolan were a thinker or skeptic. But because Nolan is a follower, Flood emphasizes the case studies – eight of them in all. This discussion resonates with Nolan because, like all followers, he is particularly adept at placing himself in others' shoes. As part of her strategy, Flood has decided to omit any examples of failed restructurings – but she has that information on hand, just in case Nolan asks for it. The eight case studies are from industries outside of MaxPro's business so

that Flood can appeal to Nolan's desire to be innovative by saying, "We could be the first in our industry to do this kind of restructuring."

Next, Flood presents three options for the proposed restructuring, and she links each of her case studies to one of those options. To steer Nolan toward option three, which she prefers, she has linked four of the cases to that option; by contrast, she has provided Nolan with only two case study references for each of the other two options. When Nolan notes that option one is the cheapest, Flood is ready to address that issue head-on because she knows how bargain conscious he is: Her detailed analysis shows that, on a risk-adjusted basis, option three is actually the least expensive because it is more proven.

Presenting three options to Nolan does more than just give him the opportunity to make a choice; it also affords him the chance to be creative. He begins to combine aspects of options one and three – something Flood had anticipated he would do. In fact, she has even encouraged him to do so by presenting certain minor components of the different options individually. For Nolan, the ability to mix and match different parts of proven strategies is perfect: It makes him feel innovative without having to incur any major risk.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Flood further plays on Nolan's desire for both innovation and security by saying, "Yes, other companies have done this type of restructuring, but we will have more expertise implementing it, so we will do it faster and more cheaply. And because we already know what works and what doesn't, we'll be able to take the appropriate steps to avoid potential problems."

Flood understands that followers will maintain the status quo unless they're presented with information they can't afford to ignore. Because Nolan seems genuinely engrossed in hearing how the other companies have successfully reorganized, Flood expects she will hear from him within days. (Followers tend to act quickly once they see big potential for success with minimal risk.)

5. Controllers

Controllers (9% of the executives we surveyed) abhor uncertainty and ambiguity, and they will focus on the pure facts and analytics of an argument. They are both constrained and driven by their own fears and insecurities.

They are usually described as logical, unemotional, sensible, detail oriented, accurate, analytical, and objective. Like skeptics, controllers often have strong personalities and can even be overbearing. In their minds, they are the best salespeople, the best marketing experts, the best strategists, and so on. Whereas followers are good at putting themselves in others' shoes, controllers see things

only from their own perspectives and will frequently make snap judgments and remarks that alienate others. Controllers can be loners and are often self-absorbed, traits that lead them to make unilateral decisions. Indeed, although a controller may talk to others about a decision, he will seldom genuinely listen to them or consider their input. Prominent examples include Jacques Nasser, Ross Perot, and Martha Stewart.

When dealing with controllers, you need to overcome their internal fears, which they will pretend they don't have. In fact, they will cover them up by paying an inordinate amount of attention to the intricate details of processes and methods. Dealing with controllers can be like playing a game of cat and mouse – you will always be chasing down some information at their request.

In a meeting, remember that controllers can be self-absorbed, so be prepared for long silences during your interactions. It is also crucial to remember that when cornered, controllers rarely capitulate. Furthermore, even though controllers seek accuracy and facts, that does not necessarily mean they will make intelligent, rational decisions. Often, a controller will jump to illogical conclusions. And unlike charismatics, who are willing to take responsibility for their decisions, controllers try to avoid being held accountable. When something goes wrong, they assume others are at fault.

To persuade controllers, your argument needs to be structured, linear, and credible. They want details, but only if presented by an expert. In practice, the only way to sell an idea to controllers is *not* to sell it; instead, let them make the choice to buy. Your best bet is to simply supply them with the information they need and hope they will convince themselves.

Although controllers and skeptics share several characteristics, a key difference is that controllers need ample time to make decisions (they hate to be rushed). By contrast, skeptics are much quicker on the draw. One of the worst things you can do with a controller is to push your proposal too aggressively. When that happens, controllers are likely to see you as part of the problem and not the solution. Buzzwords and phrases to use with a controller include: details, facts, reason, logic, power, handle, physical, grab, keep them honest, make them pay, and just do it.

Persuasion in Practice: **Nolan the Controller**

Nolan is notorious for implementing only his own ideas, so Flood knows she must somehow make him take ownership of her proposed restructuring plan. To do that, she gears herself up for the long journey ahead. Over the course of several months, she continually sends him information – customer reports, marketing studies, financial projections, and so on – through all types of media (including print, video, and the Web) and in person.

She needs to gently wear down his defenses by steadily supplying him with so much information that he simply has to make a decision.


First, Flood focuses on data that highlight MaxPro's problems because she knows that case studies and other information won't be as important to him. Her memos often prompt Nolan to request other information, sometimes arcane and irrelevant data. She gets this for him, knowing full well that he may not even look at it.

After four months she is tempted to schedule a formal presentation, but she resists the urge. Nolan himself must request that meeting. Until that time, she will have to be content with sending him still more information. When she does, she always provides the information in a structured, linear format. In a typical memo, she begins by writing, "Attached, please find the results from a recent customer survey, and here's how they fit in with the other material we have." Flood is also quick to point out (but not resolve) apparent contradictions in the data, knowing that Nolan prides himself in uncovering those kinds of inconsistencies. In one memo, she writes, "Here's some new research from Walker Consulting. It seems to contradict the study we commissioned last year. I'm not sure which to trust."

Finally, an event – the defection of one of MaxPro's largest customers – triggers action. Thanks to Flood's patient but incessant prodding, Nolan is sensitized to this latest development. He calls a meeting of the senior staff to discuss what MaxPro should do. Included will be a discussion of a possible reorganization.

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Critics might view some of our categorizations as derogatory – after all, few executives would like being classified as followers or controllers. We do not intend to imply that any decision-making style is superior to another; our labels are merely brief descriptors of the primary behavior of each group. In fact, each style can be highly effective in certain environments. Followers, for instance, have a high sense of responsibility and can be excellent leaders at large, established corporations. And controllers can be extremely effective business leaders; Martha Stewart is a case in point.

Furthermore, we do not mean to oversimplify the complex and often mysterious ways in which people reach conclusions. To be sure, decision making is a complicated, multifaceted process that researchers may never fully unpick. That said, we strongly believe that executives tend to make important decisions in predictable ways. And knowing their preferences for hearing or seeing certain types of information at specific stages in their decision-making process can substantially improve your ability to tip the outcome your way. 

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