

# The Language of Persuasion

*HARD, SOFT OR RATIONAL: OUR CHOICE  
DEPENDS ON POWER, EXPECTATIONS  
AND WHAT WE HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH.*

BY DAVID KIPNIS AND  
STUART SCHMIDT

*"I had all the facts and figures ready before I made my suggestions to my boss." (Manager)*

*"I kept insisting that we do it my way. She finally caved in." (Husband)*

*"I think it's about time that you stop thinking these negative things about yourself." (Psychotherapist)*

*"Send out more horses, skirr the country round. Hang those that talk of fear. Give me mine armour." (Macbeth, Act 5)*

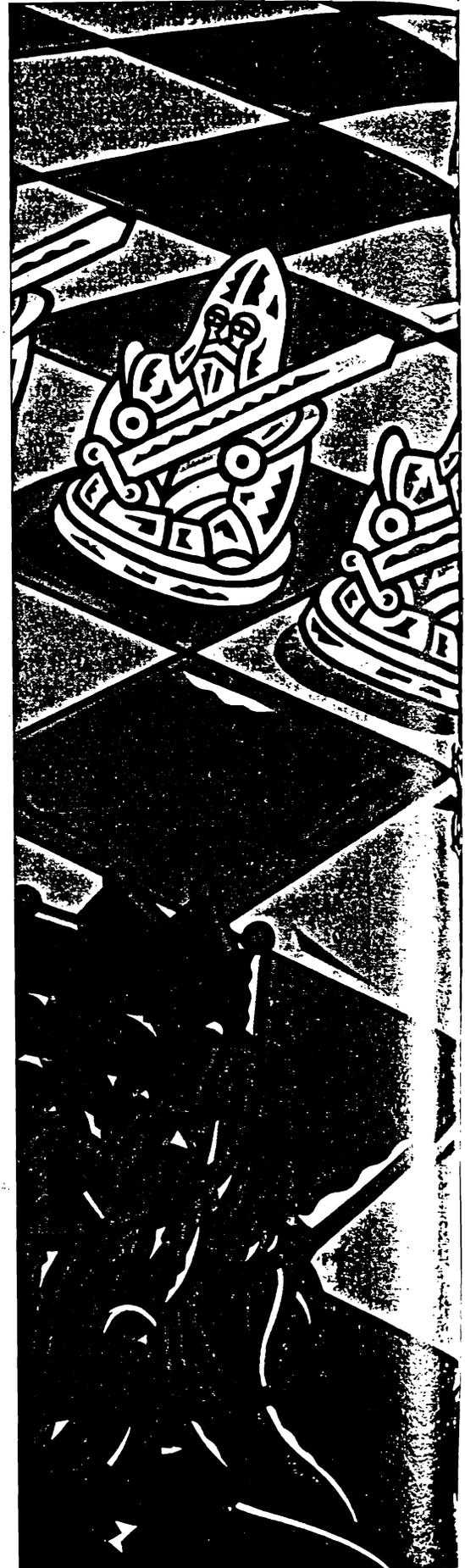
These diverse statements—rational, insistent, emotional—have one thing in common. They all show people trying to persuade others, a skill we all treasure. Books about power and influence are read by young executives eager for promotion, by politicians anxious to sway their constituents, by lonely people looking to win and hold a mate and by harried parents trying to make their children see the light.

Despite this interest in persuasion, most people are not really aware of how they go about it. They spend more time choosing their clothes than they do their influence styles. Even fewer

are aware of how their styles affect others or themselves. Although shouts and demands may make people dance to our tune, we will probably lose their goodwill. Beyond that, our opinion of others may change for the worse when we use hard or abusive tactics (see "The View from the Top," *Psychology Today*, December 1984).

Popular books on influencing others give contradictory advice. Some advocate assertiveness, others stealth and still others reason and logic. Could they all be right? We decided to see for ourselves what kinds of influence people actually use in personal and work situations and why they choose the tactics they do.

We conducted studies of dating couples and business managers in which the couples described how they attempted to influence their partners and the managers told how they attempted to influence their subordinates, peers and superiors at work. We then used these descriptions as the basis for separate questionnaires in which we asked other couples and managers how frequently they employed each tactic. Using factor analysis and other statistical techniques, we found that the tactics could be classi-



## INFLUENCE STRATEGIES

Strategy	Couples	Managers
<b>Hard</b>	I get angry and demand that he/she give in.	I simply order the person to do what I ask.
	As the first step I make him/her feel stupid and worthless.	I threaten to give an unsatisfactory performance evaluation.
	I say I'll leave him/her if my spouse does not agree.	I get higher management to back up my request.
<b>Soft</b>	I act warm and charming before bringing up the subject.	I act very humble while making my request.
	I am so nice that he/she cannot refuse.	I make the person feel important by saying that she/he has the brains and experience to do what I want.
<b>Rational</b>	I offer to compromise; I'll give up a little if she/he gives up a little.	I offer to exchange favors: You do this for me, and I'll do something for you.
	We talk, discussing our views objectively without arguments.	I explain the reason for my request.

**WE** FOUND  
**THAT PEOPLE USE**  
**MANY DIFFERENT STRATEGIES,**  
**DEPENDING ON THE**  
**SITUATION AND THE PERSON**  
**THEY WANT TO INFLUENCE.**

fied into three basic strategies—hard, soft and rational (see the “Influence Strategies” box).

These labels describe the tactics from the standpoint of the person using them. Since influencing someone is a social act, its meaning depends upon the observer's vantage point. For example, a wife might ask her husband, “I wonder what we should do about the newspapers in the garage?” The husband could consider this remark nagging to get him to clean up the garage. The wife might say her remark was simply a friendly suggestion that he consider the state of the garage. An outside observer might feel that the wife's remark was just conversation, not a real attempt to influence.

As the box illustrates, hard tactics involve demanding, shouting and assertiveness. With soft tactics, people act nice and flatter others to get their way. Rational tactics involve the use of logic and bargaining to demonstrate why compliance or compromise is the best solution.

Why do people shout and demand in one instance, flatter in a second and offer to compromise in a third? One common explanation is that the choice of tactics is based upon what “feels right” in each case. A more pragmatic answer is that the choice of tactics is based strictly on what works.

Our studies show that the reasons are more complex. When we examine how people actually use influence, we find that they use many different strategies, depending on the situation and the person being influenced. We gathered information from 195 dating and married couples, and from 360 first- and second-line managers in the United States, Australia and Great Britain. We asked which influence tac-

## WHY PEOPLE CHOOSE EACH STRATEGY

### **Hard tactics are normally used when:**

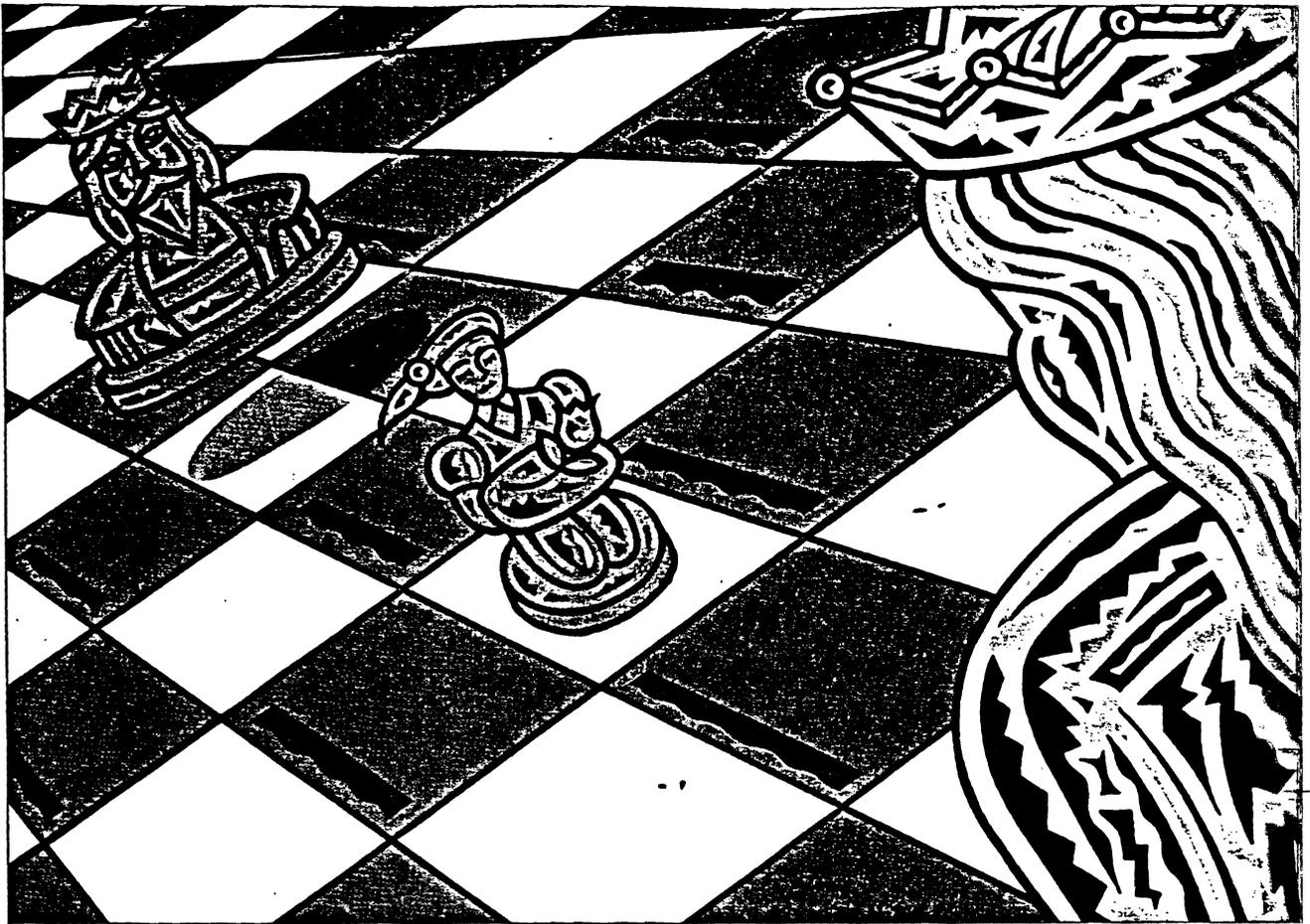
Influencer has the advantage.  
 Resistance is anticipated.  
 Target's behavior violates social or organizational norms.

### **Soft tactics are normally used when:**

Influencer is at a disadvantage.  
 Resistance is anticipated.  
 The goal is to get benefits for one's self.

### **Rational tactics are normally used when:**

Neither party has a real power advantage.  
 Resistance is not anticipated.  
 The goal is to get benefits for one's self and one's organization.



tics they used, how frequently and in what conditions.

The choice of strategies varied predictably for both managers (see the "Bystanders" box) and couples. It depends on their particular objectives, relative power position and expectations about the willingness of others to do what they want. These expectations are often based on individual traits and biases rather than facts.

### **Objectives**

One of our grandmothers always advised sweetly, "Act nice if you want a favor." We found that people do, indeed, vary their tactics according to what they want.

At work, for instance, managers frequently rely on soft tactics—flattery, praise, acting humble—when they want something from a boss such as time off or better assignments. However, when managers want to persuade the boss to accept ideas, such as a new work procedure, they're more likely to use reason and logic. Occasionally, they will even try hard tactics, such as going over the

---

**G** *ETTING PERSONAL BENEFITS, SUCH AS CHOOSING A MOVIE OR RESTAURANT FOR THE NIGHT, CALLS FOR A SOFT, LOVING APPROACH. BUT TO CHANGE A SPOUSE'S UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIOR, THREATS AND OTHER HARD TACTICS COME INTO PLAY.*

---

boss's head, if he or she can't be moved any other way.

Couples also vary their choice of tactics depending upon what they want from each other. Personal benefits such as choosing a movie or restaurant for the night call for a soft, loving approach. When they want to change a spouse's unacceptable behavior, anger, threats and other hard tactics come into play.

### **Power Positions**

People who control resources, emo-

tions or finances valued by others clearly have the advantage in a relationship, whether it is commercial or personal. In our research with couples, we discovered which partner was dominant by asking who made the final decision about issues such as spending money, choosing friends and other family matters. We found that people who say they control the relationship ("I have the final say") often rely on hard tactics to get their way. Those who share decision power ("We decide together") bargain rationally and often compromise. Partners who admit

**T**HERE SEEMS TO BE AN  
**IRON LAW OF POWER: THE GREATER THE  
 DIFFERENCE IN CLOUT BETWEEN  
 TWO PEOPLE, THE GREATER THE LIKELIHOOD  
 THAT HARD TACTICS WILL BE USED.**

that they have little power ("My partner has the final say") usually favor soft tactics.

We found the same patterns among managers. The more one-sided the power relationship at work, the more likely managers are to demand, get

angry and insist with people who work for them, and the more likely they are to act humble and flatter when they are persuading their bosses.

The fact that people change influence tactics depending on their power over the other person is hardly sur-

prising. What is surprising is how universal the link is between power and tactics. Our surveys and those conducted by others have found this relationship among children trying to influence younger children or older children, and among executives dealing with executives at other companies more or less powerful than their own, as well as among spouses and business managers dealing with their own subordinates and bosses.

There seems to be an "Iron Law of Power": The greater the discrepancy in clout between the influencer and the target, the greater the likelihood that hard tactics will be used. People with power don't always use hard tactics as their first choice. At first, most simply request and explain. They turn to demands and threats (the iron fist lurking under the velvet glove of rea-

**THE SHAKESPEARE CONNECTION**

**T**he best art is life condensed, with its truths shown clearly and accurately. One of us (Kipnis) decided to test what has been learned about tactics of influence by comparing this understanding with how two of William Shakespeare's most famous characters go about persuading others. Each time King Lear and Macbeth try to influence someone in the play, successfully or not, the attempt was coded as hard, soft or rational. For example:

**Hard tactic**

"Kent, on thy life, no more."  
 (Lear, Act I, Scene 1)

**Soft tactic**

"Pray do not mock me. I am a very foolish fond old man."  
 (Lear, Act IV, Scene 7)

**Rational tactic**

"Think upon what hath chanced; and . . . the interim having weighed it, let us speak . . ."  
 (Macbeth, Act I, Scene 3)

Both Macbeth and Lear consistently attempt to influence others throughout the plays, more in the last act than earlier. This finding is particularly interesting in regard to Lear, since he is thought of as an increasingly feeble, dying old man.

Yet, when you analyze his words, he tries to exercise influence more frequently in the fifth act than at any other time in the play.

But the methods Lear and Macbeth use change dramatically during the five acts. As the table below indicates, Lear's tactics become increasingly soft, while Macbeth's become harder and harder.

Art, then, imitates life. Both Lear and Macbeth choose their tactics in relation to their power. Since Lear has given up his major base of power (his kingdom) in Act I, he must plead and use soft words. Macbeth, who has gained a kingdom, turns increasingly to tough tactics.



**Influence Tactics\* in King Lear and Macbeth**

Tactic	King Lear					Macbeth				
	Act I	Act II	Act III	Act IV	Act V	Act I	Act II	Act III	Act IV	Act V
Hard	64	57	13	14	0	33	36	44	75	77
Soft	16	38	25	79	100	33	36	9	19	4
Rational	20	5	63	7	0	33	27	47	6	19

\*Expressed in percentages. Some columns don't add up to 100 because the figures are rounded off.



son) only when someone seems reluctant or refuses to comply with their request.

In contrast, people with little power are likely to stop trying or immediately shift to soft tactics when they encounter resistance. They feel the costs associated with the use of hard or even rational tactics are unacceptable. They are unwilling to take the chance of angering a boss, a spouse or an older child by using anything but soft methods.

### Expectations and Biases

We have found that people also vary their strategies according to how successful they expect to be in influencing their targets. When they believe that someone is likely to do what is asked, they make simple requests. When they anticipate resistance and have the power, they use hard tactics.

This anticipation may be realistic. Just as a robber knows that without a gun, a polite request for money is unlikely to persuade, a boss knows that a request for work on Saturday needs more than a smile to back it up. But less realistic personal and situational factors sometimes make us expect resistance where none exists. People who are low in self-esteem and self-confidence, for instance, have difficulty believing that others will comply with simple requests.

We found that lack of confidence and low self-esteem are characteristic of managers who bark orders and refuse to discuss the issues involved, of couples who constantly shout and scream at each other and of parents who rely on harsh discipline. These hard tactics result from the self-defeating assumption that others will not listen unless they are treated roughly.

Social situations and biases can also distort expectations of cooperation. Misunderstandings based on differences in attitudes, race or sex can lead to hard tactics. Our research, and that of others, shows that orders, shouts and threats are more likely to be used between blacks and whites or men and women. The simple perception that "these people are different than I am" leads to the idea that "they are not as reasonable as I am" and must be ordered about.

The reasons shown in the "Why People Choose" box are generaliza-

---

# T

**OUGH TACTICS OFTEN RESULT FROM  
MANAGERS' SELF-DEFEATING ASSUMPTIONS THAT  
OTHERS WILL NOT DO WHAT MANAGERS  
WANT THEM TO UNLESS THEY ARE TREATED HARSHLY.**

---

tions. They don't necessarily describe how a particular person will act in a particular situation. People may use influence tactics because of habit, lack of forethought or lack of social sensitivity. Most of us would be more effective persuaders if we analyzed why we act as we do. Simply writing a short description of a recent incident in which we tried to persuade someone can help us understand better our own tactics, why we use them and, perhaps, why a rational approach might be better.

People who know we have studied the matter sometimes ask, "Which tactics work best?" The answer is that they all work if they are used at the right time with the right person. But both hard and soft tactics involve costs to the user even when they succeed. Hard tactics often alienate the people being influenced and create a

climate of hostility and resistance. Soft tactics—acting nice, being humble—may lessen self-respect and self-esteem. In contrast, we found that people who rely chiefly on logic, reason and compromise to get their way are the most satisfied both with their business lives and with their personal relationships. □

---

*David Kipnis is chairperson of the psychology department, and Stuart Schmidt is professor of human resources administration in the School of Business Administration, both at Temple University. Their survey, "Profiles of Organizational Influence Strategies," is published by University Associates, San Diego.*

Kipnis and Schmidt deal with this subject in an audio cassette. To order, see the Psychology Today Tape advertisement in this issue.

## BYSTANDERS, TACTICIANS AND SHOTGUN MANAGERS

**W**hen we analyzed data from our study of managers, three distinct types emerged:

Shotgun managers use any and all means to get their way. Compared with the others we studied, they have the least managerial experience, hold staff rather than line positions and express the greatest number of personal needs (to receive benefits) and organizational needs (to sell their ideas) that require them to exercise influence. Shotgun managers are young, ambitious and unwilling to take no for an answer.

Tacticians rely heavily on reason to influence others. They usually have considerable power in an organization, direct units that do technologically complex work and feel they influence company policy.

Bystanders are the timid souls of the sample. They seldom use their managerial power to persuade others. Bystanders usually direct units that do routine work and have been in the same job for more years, on the average, than the other managers. Our impression is that they are marking time and feel it is futile even to try to influence others.