



TRANSCRIPT

Episode #18: Sometimes Self-Interest Gets A Bad Rap

You are listening to Episode 18 of *Mastering The Power Skills*. You know, sometimes self-interest gets a bad rap. Sure, if it's the only thing that motivates someone, that's a problem in a lot of ways. But we all have legitimate personal concerns and interests because, well, we're all human beings, right?

And even if we make workplace decisions in an objective and unbiased way, those personal concerns and interests still exist, and occasionally factor into the decisions we make. Join us in this episode, and we'll explore how taking into account the self-interest of others can make us better persuaders.

How much more could you accomplish if you were 25% or even 50% more influential and persuasive? Welcome to *Mastering The Power Skills*, the podcast that provides you with the tips, strategies, and the inspiration to grow your own

power and win support for your ideas. And now here's your host, C-suite leadership coach Kathy Dockry.

Hi, everyone. Today, we're going to be talking about the power skill of persuasion. That's the skill that we use when we want people to take our particular ideas and our suggestions seriously. In other words, they may already like and respect us, or maybe we don't even yet have a relationship with them, but we have an idea or a proposal that we want people to approve and get behind. So we need to convince them to do that.

Now, a lot of times we think of persuasion as a fairly straightforward process, right? We put together a logical case supported by things like facts and analyses and best practices. And then we simply present that to other people for their consideration. But like a lot of things in life, we can have a few blind spots that can get in the way of us being as persuasive as we could be.

A strong logical case might get us, say 50% of the way there if we're lucky. In other words, there may be a 50/50 chance that we get the support that we need for our proposal. But there are other factors that come into play if we want to have more than a 50/50 chance.

If we want to increase the odds in our favor and have a, say 75% chance of winning, or even a 90% chance, we need to take into account those other factors. Some of those other factors we naturally think about. For example, things like the current politics of the workplace, or the timing of when you make your proposal. But smart high-achievers can also have blind spots about a few other important factors. And based on my experience there are at least three factors that commonly get overlooked.

One of those factors is the need to address the emotional context of decision makers. We've already talked about that in episode four of the podcast, how to leverage emotions to become more persuasive. So be sure to listen to that one if you want to understand the role of emotions in persuading other people, it's an important factor.

Another blind spot we can have is an over reliance on supporting our proposal with analysis about why the proposal makes sense and how we should achieve the proposal. And we do that sometimes at the expense of really exploring with decision makers what outcomes will be delivered by the idea.

Of course, the why and the how, they both have some degree of relevance. But the what of what the idea will deliver is going to be much more compelling to

decision makers. We're going to explore the techniques for strengthening this part of our persuasive skills in later episodes.

But today, we're going to talk about the third blind spot we can have when we try to persuade others. That blind spot is the very legitimate role of people's self-interest. Now, sometimes people get a little bent out of shape when I say that the self-interest of others is actually legitimate and should be taken into account when we want to persuade them.

People can worry that there's something dysfunctional or manipulative in acknowledging and responding to the self-interest of others. Later on in this episode I'll give you some reasons why I don't believe that's at all true. So stay with me here to learn more about that.

I actually think it's wise and even kind to take self-interest of others into account when we have a good idea that can deliver solid benefits for many people. But first, let me give you two very simple examples of phrases that I use when I'm persuading people to make a decision in my favor. I think they're great examples of why taking into account someone's self-interest is both legitimate and really helpful in increasing the odds that they will find you persuasive.

The first phrase I use is, don't worry, I or we have got your back. So think about that. Suppose someone comes to you with an idea they want you to sign off on, let's say it's a direct report or it's a peer. And it might be a good idea in theory, but one of the first questions that's going to occur to you is, can I trust you to execute this idea in a way that doesn't come back to haunt me and damage my own credibility?

For example, is there a risk that the person is not yet experienced enough to execute the idea and could drop the ball? Or is there a risk that the person might handle the interpersonal dynamics, otherwise known as politics, ineptly and the whole thing either blows up or fizzles? So as I pitch my idea to you, you're going to feel a whole lot better if I tell you, "Don't worry, I won't let you down if you approve this. I'll make sure your personal credibility doesn't take a hit" You're going to be much more likely to say yes, you'll support my proposal.

The second phrase that I often use is you're going to look like a hero or a rock star when this idea delivers its results. Now, that might sound like blatant flattery from where you sit, but it's often something that's very necessary for the other person to understand.

Again, if I pitch an idea to you, aren't you going to feel a lot better about saying yes if you understand that there's a halo effect that will enhance your own

credibility and reputation? Looking good, hopefully, isn't your only motivation, of course. But looking good is a nice ancillary benefit for sure. We all enjoy looking good. It's natural and it's not at all selfish.

For example, I love it when my team does well and people acknowledge them for it. Sure, I'm genuinely happy for them, I tend to be very emotionally invested in the professional wellbeing of my direct reports. But I also don't mind what their success says about me, that I'm a person with the ability to spot special talent and to develop that talent well.

So at this point you might say, okay, I get these phrases. Don't worry, I have your back and you're going to look like a hero. I get that they acknowledge the other person's self-interest. But do they really have persuasive power? After all, they're just words. Why should the person trust you and regard them as genuine?

Well, I've found that there are two reasons why people find these phrases compelling. The first is that even if the person doesn't know you well, they're often impressed by the fact that you actually thought about them and what the impact might be on them if they approved your idea. This gives them a little more confidence that if you're that savvy, you're also probably savvy enough to deliver on the promises.

But the second reason why these phrases can be convincing is that if the person already knows you, in other words if you already have been building relationships and credibility through using your influencing skills, then they already have a lot of evidence to test the credibility of what you're saying. In other words, what you're saying is not just words, the words are already backed up by your reputation and your track record.

So I hope these two little examples have demonstrated two things. First, that it's perfectly normal for smart and well-intended people to have self-interested concerns when you try to persuade them to support your proposal. And secondly, when you actually address their natural self-interest you can often increase the probability that they're going to support your idea and that they'll feel comfortable and safe in doing so. They're less likely to waffle on their commitment later on.

So let's go back now to the question of why many of us, and I include myself in that category, can have a blind spot about the self-interest of others when we're trying to persuade them to support our idea. It's important for us to know this so we can eliminate that blind spot going forward. And there are probably two causes for not being clued in to the self-interest of another person.

The first is innocent ignorance. In other words, we can't see the self-interested concerns of the other person because we don't share those same concerns. This happens a lot when we're dealing with someone higher up in the hierarchy than we are, like a boss or a member of the management team.

We actually might be clueless as to their budgetary concerns, or their anxiety about a political rival. So even though these issues might be relevant as to whether they will support our proposal, we don't factor them into the argument that we're making for our idea.

The solution to this particular blind spot is simple, we have to remember to always remain curious and pick up those concerns before we make our proposal. Our curiosity could be as simple as going to someone who might have good insight and saying, "By the way, what's up with so and so nowadays? What's top of mind for him or her?"

Or you could exercise your own imaginative powers by saying to yourself, "If I were in so and so's shoes, what might be exciting me or concerning me right now? What would likely be my frame of mind or emotional state?" Chances are, if you've already been building and deepening relationships through your influencing skills, you might already have some perspective and insight if you just think about answering those questions.

There's also a second common reason for not addressing someone else's self-interests when we make a proposal. And this reason is a little bit more insidious. We can have a bit of a sanctimonious mindset about other people's self-interest. We can be thinking they shouldn't have self-interest, or that they're even bad for having it.

We also can get a little fronted, right? After all, what's the matter with them that they can't just trust us? Our idea is pretty logical and besides, we have a lot of expertise and we're the good guys, right? Does that sound familiar to you?

I know I've certainly been there and I've had thoughts like, "Come on, come on. Don't be so selfish, or dense or obstinate. Just get on board." I can also be thinking, "Why can't you be motivated the way I am? Logical, unbiased and completely detached from any self-interest." But really, when we say those thoughts out loud, we all can feel how ridiculous they are.

We all, each and every one of us, at least consider our self-interest when someone else is trying to persuade us to do something. It's simply part of the human condition and it's perfectly normal. We might find the self-interest of others distasteful, of course, if we don't share it or if it appears it's the only thing

that they're motivated by. But that doesn't mean that we ourselves are without self-interest.

Even when we're at our logical, unbiased and well-motivated best, we always ask ourselves the question, "What will agreeing to this proposal do to me? Will I be at some risk of losing credibility, or losing some relationships, or losing budget, or even my job?" And if the answer to that question is yes, there is some negative risk, then we do a personal cost benefit analysis. How big a risk is it? Because we might be completely unwilling to take on a big risk, even if it's a very good proposal or idea.

You know, my recent interview with Angie Bryan, who spent her career in the Foreign Service got me thinking that it's helpful to look at the topic of self-interest through the lens of statesmanship and diplomacy. Arguably, those disciplines exist because it's a given that nations have self-interest, and that those are legitimate even when we don't share them.

For example, it might be too dangerous for a small nation to sign a UN initiative to impose sanctions on a larger nearby country, regardless of whether those initiatives are logical and well thought through. And a sympathetic diplomat from, say a theocracy like Iran, can legitimately wonder about the personal implications

and what they will mean to him or her when they sign on to certain human rights initiatives.

Statesmanship exists to navigate the fact that, of course, self-interest is out there in the world and we need to acknowledge and work with it effectively. In other words, we can't effectively persuade other people to support us, or at least not oppose us, if we ignore what their personal concerns are, whether we think those concerns are worthy ones or not. And that's not just true of international politics, it's true as well in our work lives and our personal lives.

So what does this mean with respect to becoming skilled persuaders in the workplace? Well, it means at least two things. First, as we discussed before, the quality of curiosity is such a valuable asset to you. Get curious about decision makers, what makes them tick, and what is top of mind for them at the moment. Those insights will help you figure out what sort of things might appeal to their self-interests.

And secondly, before you approach them to win support for your idea, ask yourself a few questions. Is there anything I can tell them about my proposal that will help them personally, or that will reassure them that some risk that they might fear won't happen? Or is there some kind of promise I can make them?

Some kind of bargain I can make with them along the lines of if you support me on this, I promise to help you on that.

Challenge yourself to think creatively on this. And allow yourself to be understanding of their needs and concerns, even if you don't completely agree with them or share them. This is the way good persuaders win acceptance for their ideas, and they have higher win rates than many of us do.

They have clarity that they're working with other human beings who have human feelings and human concerns. And they're willing to be creative to ensure that good ideas actually move forward and make a difference, rather than evaporate, because the support isn't generated.

So here's to you also getting to move your ideas forward in the world by investing time and thinking through what the personal self-interest of decision makers are. And in the meantime, I hope you have an awesome week ahead and I'll see you in our next episode.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Mastering The Power Skills*. If you like what was offered in today's show and want more insights and resources from Kathy, check us out at www.significagroup.com.