

# How to be more persuasive

Knowing how to get what you want can really boost your career prospects and luckily, it's a skill that can be learned. Steve Martin reveals five ways to influence the people that count

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Some people have it, but many more do not. They are the lucky few who possess the natural ability to convince potential employers to give them the job or to persuade their manager that the next promotion should be theirs.

What can be especially frustrating, as we watch these individuals almost effortlessly charm their way to getting what they want, is the realisation that they are no more talented or any more experienced than us. The only apparent difference is that they seem to have mastered the art of persuading others to give them what they want.

With employers finding themselves spoiled for choice with an array of applicants all with similar backgrounds, skills and experience, often it's the most persuasive candidate that is the successful one. As a result, in today's competitive workplace our ability to influence and persuade others has never been so important.

But before you resign yourself to thinking that all is lost because you are a persuasion lightweight, here is some good news. The ability to influence and persuade others is not gifted to a chosen few. Persuasion can be learned and researchers who study it have uncovered a set of rules for improving your powers of persuasion and moving people in your direction. Learning about these rules and honestly employing them can improve your chances of finding that great new job, getting the promotion you deserve, becoming a more effective networker and generally increasing your influence at work.

Whether it's a job interview, a pay review or a client meeting, here are five tips to help you get the outcome you want at work.

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## 1. Give first, and receive later

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If a friend of yours invites you to their house for dinner, you instinctively know that you should invite them back to your house at some point in the future. And if they remember your birthday with a gift, then you should remember theirs. Psychologists call this the reciprocity rule, and it is a rule that all societies honour. While we may intuitively use the rule with our nearest and dearest, people often forget that the reciprocity rule can be equally useful when dealing with our work colleagues as well as with people who we know less well or even not at all.

One study conducted in restaurants found that waiters were able to persuade many more customers to leave them a tip by simply giving them a mint just before they placed the bill on the table. If they gave two mints not only did they increase the number of tips they received but also the size of the tip. Notice that the waiters' success was down to them being the first to give. When the mints are given after customers have paid their bill, then the effect is lost.

Studies like these can provide some important lessons about persuasion. Effective persuaders don't ask themselves "who can help me?" but instead ask "whom can I help?" Providing first instills a sense of obligation in that person to help in return.

Lending a hand to a colleague or manager of another team when they need help will increase your chances of getting support from them when you need it. Taking the time to provide useful information to a recruitment consultant or even cheekily giving them a small gift might make the difference. A recruitment manager I know told me that he once found himself placing the CV of one particular candidate at the top of the selection he sent to employers. The reason? At their last meeting, the candidate had brought a box of home-made biscuits into the office.

**Persuasion tip:** Be the first to give. Look to help others and build obligations that could lead to them helping you in return.

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## 2. Admit your weaknesses

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Trust is a critical component to persuading a potential employer that you should get the job. Persuasion research suggests that one of the most effective ways to be seen as an honest and credible applicant is also one of the most surprising: admit a weakness in your application.

In one study, several hundred CVs were sent in response to an advertisement, together with a covering letter from the "applicant". In fact, though, there were two versions of the covering letter. The first contained wholly positive information about why the applicant was best suited to the job. However, the second contained a small drawback about the applicant's suitability that appeared immediately before the candidate communicated the strongest reason why they were best suited for the job (maybe they had four years' experience rather than the desired five).

The study authors concluded that the reason the second letter generated many more invitations to attend an interview was that the covering letter had gained a credibility and trustworthiness that the first did not.

**Persuasion tip:** Be prepared to admit small weaknesses to build credibility.

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## 3. Highlight loss, not just gain

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The competition for that new job or promotion is intense and other applicants have similar skills and experience to you. How do you differentiate yourself? Persuasion experts suggest that you appeal to loss. Don't just talk about what your new employer will gain by giving you the job, but also respectfully point out what they stand to lose if they don't take you on. A study in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* showed potential losses figure far more in a manager's decision-making than the same things presented as gains.

**Persuasion tip:** Never forget to point out to potential employers and managers that your skills, experience and uniqueness will be lost if they don't consider your application seriously.

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## 4. Use the testimony of others

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In *Yes! 50 Secrets from the Science of Persuasion*, a book I co-authored, we describe a study proving that, compared with the standard environmental message, many more hotel guests will reuse their towels if the little card in the bathroom tells them that previous guests reused theirs.

This is because people will often look to what others are doing or saying when deciding what decision to make. This is especially true in situations of uncertainty or when several choices are available.

These little cards don't just make a difference to the environment – they could also make a difference to your employment prospects. Providing examples of what others are saying about your suitability and skills is extremely persuasive and the more you have, the more your influence rises.

As is often the case with persuasion, what you do first matters. Remembering to ask for a testimonial or a recommendation immediately after you have delivered a piece of work or successfully completed a project means that you always have it on hand for future job applications.

It also helps to avoid asking someone to remember a great job you did months ago, that they may well have forgotten about by now.

**Persuasion tip:** Collect testimonials and recommendations and share those that are most similarly matched to the requirements of potential employers and recruitment managers. Prepare a two-line biography detailing your skills with a contact number. Share it with friends and colleagues who would be prepared to pass it on to some of their contacts.

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## 5. Seek common ground

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Few will argue with the idea that people prefer to say yes to others that they like. As a result, likability can have a profound influence over who gets a job. Studies show that one of the most important factors that influences one person's liking of another is how many similarities they share.

In the busy and stressful environment of a job interview, or when we are looking to build our networks, it can be tempting to focus solely on business and leave little time to find out about what we share with others.

Effective persuaders take time to seek out similarities they share with others. A couple of well-placed questions about an individual's interests, or even a quick internet search so that you can demonstrate genuine similarities, really could make all the difference.

**Persuasion tip:** Don't just research the company, try to find out about the recruiting manager, too. Look for areas for genuine similarity and build them into the interview.

**Steve Martin is a co-author (with Dr Robert Cialdini and Dr Noah Goldstein) of *Yes! 50 Secrets from the Science of Persuasion* (Profile Books, £8.99). To order a copy for £8.49 with free UK mainland p&p, go to [guardian.co.uk/bookshop](http://guardian.co.uk/bookshop) or call 0330 333 6846**

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## How persuasive are you?

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Can you control a set-piece conversation, or are you putty in the hands of others? Take our quick test to find out

**1. At a job interview, you are asked to talk about both your strengths and weaknesses. When should you mention your weaknesses?**

- a) After you talk about your strengths
- b) Before you talk about your strengths
- c) Weaknesses? What weaknesses?

**2. You want to persuade a colleague at work to support your application for promotion. You would be most effective by asking them to think of:**

- a) One or two reasons why they should support you
- b) Three or four reasons why they should support you
- c) As many reasons as they can for why they should support you

**3. At the interview you are asked to provide good, strong arguments for why you are the best candidate. How quickly should you speak?**

- a) You should speed up a little
- b) You should speak at a moderate rate
- c) You should slow right down

**4. You have put a lot of effort into helping out a work colleague. What is the best thing you could say after they thank you for your help?**

- a) It's a pleasure. I am always happy to help.
- b) Now you owe me.
- c) I know that if I ever need your help in the future you'd do the same for me.

**5. You meet a man called Lawrence at a dinner party. Which of the following is his most likely occupation?**

- a) Roofing contractor
- b) Dentist
- c) Lawyer

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## Answers

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1:B 2:A 3:C 4:C 5:C

How did you score? 4-5 right answers: You are a true persuader. 2-3: Could do better.

0-1: Please call us. We have a nice car for sale.

Find out how much more you know about persuasion by taking the [free, longer test](#).