STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Upfront

Aim for the Middle: To persuade a whole group, start by changing the minds of a few moderates

By Alana Conner

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Spring 2008

Copyright © 2007 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved

STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
Stanford Social Innovation Review
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, **www.ssireview.com**

Aim for the Middle

To persuade a whole group, start by changing the minds of a few moderates

"By the way, that's not just my opinion. It also happens to be the opinion of some guy on NPR."

On its Web site, the San Francisco-based Democracy Center offers a handy guide on how to lobby legislators. The guide first classifies legislators into five kinds: champions of an issue; allies of an issue; fence-sitters, who are neutral about an issue; mellow opponents; and hard-core opponents. It then identifies fence-sitters as "your key targets," and defines lobbying strategy as "putting together the right mix of [messages] to sway [fence-sitters] your way."

Economists Bernard Caillaud and Jean Tirole reach the same conclusion in the December 2007 issue of the *American Economic Review*. Using mathematical models, the authors explore how best to persuade a group of people. They write that the most effective method is "to engineer persuasion cascades in which members who are brought on board sway the opinion of others." The first people in the cascade, they find, should be fence-sitters – moderates who are neither so opposed to a proposal as to be unmovable nor so enamored of it as to be incredible to the unconvinced.

"The value of getting an endorsement by someone who is neither an ally nor a resolute enemy is exemplified by the impact of the *Financial Times*' endorsement of Tony Blair in his accession to the prime ministership," says Tirole, who is a professor at the University of Toulouse. Also, "when pursuing reforms, European governments try to get moderate worker and student unions on board."

To turn the hearts of the first moderates, the authors write, a persuader must use hard information – evidence, reports, material proofs, and other facts – to convince them of the proposal's reasonableness. Using hard information to persuade everyone is impossible, though, because both persuaders and targets have to exert a lot of effort to convey and understand the message. But the newly convinced moderates can rely on soft information – simple endorsements and perfunctory explanations – to convert the remainder of the group, who already trust the moderates' judgment.

"Charismatic leaders," notes Tirole, "are often people who – for good or bad reasons – are highly trusted by others and can get them to move without an in-depth argument of why their advocated policy makes sense."

But allies' reliance on soft information can backfire, notes Tirole. When persuaders and targets have similar interests, persuaders may "prefer the authoritative argument 'trust me,' as it saves time and especially does not jeopardize the targets' support by giving too much detail," he says. By taking the target for granted and not sharing enough hard information, the persuader may fail to win the target's support.

Overall, however, the more homogeneous a group, the easier it is to persuade. Because members already share similar interests, they can use cheaper, easier soft information to convince each other. And so a new proposal can sweep more quickly through the persuasion cascade.

Groups, not individuals, make many of societies' most important decisions, from legislatures writing laws, to corporate boards forging policies, to nonprofit committees crafting programs. Yet economists have paid "surprisingly little attention to how sponsors of ideas or projects should design their strategies to obtain favorable group decisions," write the authors. At the same time, activist nonprofits such as the Democracy Center have learned through experience that first aiming for the middle is the best way to persuade a group. In this case, science mimics life. *–Alana Conner*

CARTOON BY DAVID SIPRESS ©2003 *THE NEW YORKER* COLLECTION/CARTOONBANK.COM