



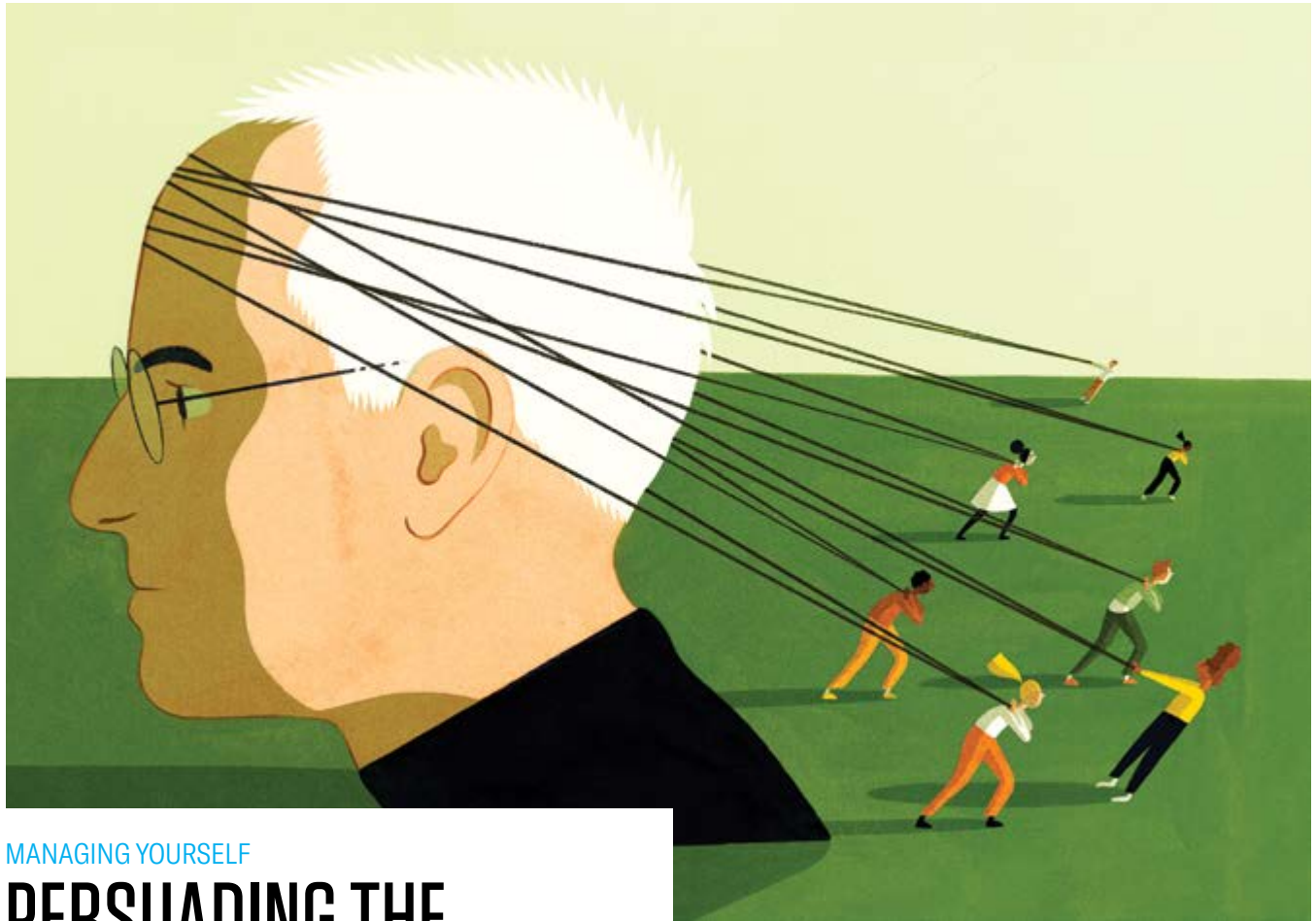
Managing Yourself

Persuading the Unpersuadable

by Adam Grant

Experience

Advice and Inspiration



MANAGING YOURSELF

PERSUADING THE UNPERSUADABLE

Lessons from science—and the people who were able to sway Steve Jobs

by Adam Grant

THE LEGEND OF Steve Jobs is that he transformed our lives with the strength of his convictions. The key to his greatness, the story goes, was his ability to bend the world to his vision. The reality is that much of Apple's success came from his team's pushing him to rethink his positions. If Jobs hadn't surrounded himself with people who knew how to change his mind, he might not have changed the world.

For years Jobs insisted he would never make a phone. After his team finally persuaded him to reconsider, he banned outside apps; it took another year to get him to reverse that stance. Within nine months the App Store had

Experience

a billion downloads, and a decade later the iPhone had generated more than \$1 trillion in revenue.

Almost every leader has studied the genius of Jobs, but surprisingly few have studied the genius of those who managed to influence him. As an organizational psychologist, I've spent time with a number of people who succeeded in motivating him to think again, and I've analyzed the science behind their techniques. The bad news is that plenty of leaders are so sure of themselves that they reject worthy opinions and ideas from others and refuse to abandon their own bad ones. The good news is that it is possible to get even the most overconfident, stubborn, narcissistic, and disagreeable people to open their minds.

A growing body of evidence shows that personality traits aren't necessarily consistent from one situation to the next. Think of the dominant manager who is occasionally submissive, the hypercompetitive colleague who sporadically becomes cooperative, or the chronic procrastinator who finishes some projects early. Every leader has an *if...then* profile: a pattern of responding to particular scenarios in certain ways. If the dominant manager is interacting with a superior...then she becomes submissive. If the competitive colleague is dealing with an important client...then she shifts into cooperative mode. If the procrastinator has a crucial deadline coming up...then she gets her act together.

Computer code is a string of *if...then* commands. Humans are a lot messier, but we too have predictable *if...then* responses. Even the most rigid people flex at times, and even the most open-minded have moments when they shut



down. So if you want to reason with people who seem unreasonable, pay attention to instances when they—or others like them—change their minds. Here are some approaches that can help you encourage a know-it-all to recognize when there's something to be learned, a stubborn colleague to make a U-turn, a narcissist to show humility, and a disagreeable boss to agree with you.

ASK A KNOW-IT-ALL TO EXPLAIN HOW THINGS WORK

The first barrier to changing someone's view is arrogance. We've all encountered leaders who are overconfident: They don't know what they don't know. If you call out their ignorance directly, they may get defensive. A better approach is to let them recognize the gaps in their own understanding.

In a series of experiments, psychologists asked Yale students to rate their knowledge of how everyday objects, such as televisions and toilets, work. The students were supremely confident in their knowledge—until they were asked to write out their explanations step-by-step. As they struggled to articulate how a TV transmits a picture and a toilet flushes, their overconfidence melted away. They suddenly realized how little they understood.

Trying to explain something complex can be a humbling experience—even for someone like Steve Jobs.

A few years ago I met Wendell Weeks, the CEO of Corning, which makes the glass for the iPhone. That relationship began when Jobs reached out to him, frustrated that the plastic face of the iPhone prototype kept getting scratched. Jobs wanted strong



A growing body of evidence shows that personality traits aren't necessarily consistent from one situation to the next.

glass to cover the display, but his team at Apple had sampled some of Corning's glass and found it too fragile. Weeks explained that he could think of three ways to develop something better. "I don't know that I'd make the glass for you," he told Jobs, "but I'd be very happy to talk with any members of your team who are technical enough to talk this thing through." Jobs responded, "I'm technical enough!"

When Weeks flew out to Cupertino, Jobs tried to tell him how to make the glass. Instead of arguing, Weeks let him explain the way his preferred method would work. As Jobs started talking, it became clear to both of them that he didn't fully understand how to design glass that wouldn't shatter. That was the opening Weeks needed. He walked to a whiteboard and said, "Let me teach you some science, and then we can have a great conversation." Jobs agreed, and Weeks eventually sketched out the glass composition, complete with molecules and sodium and potassium ion exchanges. They ended up doing it Weeks's way. The day the iPhone launched, Weeks received a message from Jobs that's now framed in his office: "We couldn't have done it without you."

LET A STUBBORN PERSON SEIZE THE REINS

A second obstacle to changing people's opinions is stubbornness. Intractable people see consistency and certainty as virtues. Once made up, their minds seem to be set in stone. But their views become more pliable if you hand them a chisel.

In a classic experiment, psychologists surveyed students regarding their

beliefs about control: Did they see their successes and failures as determined primarily by internal forces, such as effort and choice, or by external forces, such as luck and fate? Stubborn people tend to believe in internal control: They think outcomes can be subject to their will. Next the students evaluated a proposed change to their university's grading system. One third read a lightly persuasive argument that the new system had been widely accepted at other schools and appeared to be one of the best ever used. Another third read a more forceful argument: This was such a good procedure that they would have to rate it highly. The final third got no persuasive argument. All the students then rated the new proposal on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 10 (very good).

Their reactions depended on their beliefs about control. In people who favored external control, both the light and the forceful arguments generated enthusiasm about the new system. They were comfortable changing their minds in the face of outside influence. People who favored internal control were unmoved by the light argument and were moved in the other direction by the forceful argument. In other words, when someone tried hard to alter their thinking, they snapped back like a rubber band.

A solution to this problem comes from a study of Hollywood screenwriters. Those who pitched fully formed concepts to executives right out of the gate struggled to get their ideas accepted. Successful screenwriters, by contrast, understood that Hollywood executives like to shape stories. Those writers treated the pitch more like a game of

catch, tossing an idea over to the suits, who would build on it and throw it back.

Not long ago I was introduced to a former Apple engineer named Mike Bell, who knew how to play catch with Steve Jobs. In the late 1990s Bell was listening to music on his Mac computer and getting annoyed at the thought of lugging the device with him from room to room. When he suggested building a separate box to stream audio, Jobs laughed at him. When Bell recommended streaming video, too, Jobs fired back, "Who the f--- would ever want to stream video?"

Bell told me that when evaluating other people's ideas, Jobs often pushed back to assert his control. But when Jobs was the one generating ideas, he was more open to considering alternatives. Bell learned to plant the seeds of a new concept, hoping that Jobs would warm to it and give it some sunlight.

Research shows that asking questions instead of giving answers can overcome people's defensiveness. You're not telling your boss what to think or do; you're giving her some control over the conversation and inviting her to share her thoughts. Questions like "What if?" and "Could we?" spark creativity by making people curious about what's possible.

One day Bell casually mentioned that since no one would have a Mac in every room, streaming on other devices was going to be a big deal. Then, instead of pressing his argument, he asked, "What if we built a box that would let you play content?" Jobs was still skeptical, but as he imagined the possibilities, he started to take some ownership of the idea and eventually gave Bell the green light. "I knew I'd succeeded when he



Because disagreeable people are energized by conflict, they don't always want you to bend to their will right away; they're eager to duke it out.

was arguing my point and proposing the project I'd pitched him," Bell recalls. "By the end he was telling people to get out of my way." That project helped pave the way for Apple TV.

FIND THE RIGHT WAY TO PRAISE A NARCISSIST

A third hurdle in the way of changing minds is narcissism. Narcissistic leaders believe they're superior and special, and they don't take kindly to being told they're wrong. But with careful framing, you can coax them toward acknowledging that they're flawed and fallible.

It's often said that bullies and narcissists have low self-esteem. But research paints a different picture: Narcissists actually have high but *unstable* self-esteem. They crave status and approval and become hostile when their fragile egos are threatened—when they're insulted, rejected, or shamed. By appealing to their desire to be admired, you can counteract their knee-jerk tendency to reject a difference of opinion as criticism. Indeed, studies in both the United States and China have shown that narcissistic leaders are capable of demonstrating humility: They can believe they're gifted while acknowledging their imperfections. To nudge them in that direction, affirm your respect for them.

In 1997, not long after returning to Apple as CEO, Jobs was discussing a new suite of technology at the company's global developer conference. During the audience Q&A, one man harshly criticized the software and Jobs himself. "It's sad and clear that on several counts you've discussed, you don't know what you're talking about," he said. (Ouch.)

You might assume that Jobs went on the attack, got defensive, or maybe even threw the man out of the room. Instead he showed humility: "One of the hardest things when you're trying to effect change is that people like this gentleman are right in some areas," he exclaimed, adding: "I readily admit there are many things in life that I don't have the faintest idea what I'm talking about. So I apologize for that... We'll find the mistakes; we'll fix them." The crowd erupted into applause.

How did the critic elicit such a calm reaction? He kicked his comments off with a compliment: "Mr. Jobs, you're a bright and influential man." As the audience laughed, Jobs replied, "Here it comes."

As this story shows, a dash of acclaim can be a powerful antidote to a narcissist's insecurity. Not all displays of respect are equally effective, though. It doesn't help to bury criticism between two compliments: The feedback sandwich doesn't taste as good as it looks. Beginnings and ends are more likely to stick in our memories than middles, and narcissists are especially likely to ignore the criticism altogether.

The key is to praise people in an area different from the one in which you hope to change their minds. If you're trying to get a narcissistic leader to rethink a bad choice, it's a mistake to say you admire her decision-making skills; you're better off commending her creativity. We all have multiple identities, and when we feel secure about one of our strengths, we become more open to accepting our shortcomings elsewhere. Psychologists find that narcissists are less aggressive—and

less selfish—after being reminded that they're athletic or funny.

The audience member at the Apple developer conference seemed to have an intuitive appreciation of Jobs's narcissistic if...then profile. By commending his intelligence and importance, he made it comfortable for Jobs to acknowledge that he didn't know everything about software.

DISAGREE WITH THE DISAGREEABLE

A final impediment to persuasion is disagreeableness, a trait often expressed through argumentativeness. Disagreeable people are determined to crush the competition, and when you urge them to reevaluate their strategy, that's what you become. However, if you're willing to stand up to them rather than back down, you can sometimes gain the upper hand.

Because disagreeable people are energized by conflict, they don't always want you to bend to their will right away; they're eager to duke it out. When researchers studied how CEOs decided which executives to nominate for board seats at other companies, it turned out that candidates who had a habit of arguing before agreeing with their bosses were more likely to get the nod. It showed that they weren't yes-men or yes-women but were willing to fight for their ideas and change their own minds. In the 1980s at Apple, the leaders of the Mac team gave an award to one person a year who had the temerity to challenge Steve Jobs. Eventually Jobs promoted each winner to run a key division of the company.

In a recent study of ideas pitched by junior people on a health care team, the vast majority were initially rejected by



senior leaders. The 24% that made it to implementation did so because their proponents kept fighting for them by refining and repeating pitches, acknowledging and addressing weaknesses, offering proof of concept, and enlisting supporters.

When Apple's engineers brought up the idea of making a phone, Jobs compiled a list of reasons why it wouldn't work. One was that smartphones were for the "pocket-protector crowd." His engineers agreed but then challenged him: If Apple made a phone, how beautiful and elegant could it be? They also tapped the competitive energy he felt toward Microsoft. Wouldn't there be a Windows phone eventually? Jobs was intrigued but he still wasn't sold. Tony Fadell, the inventor of the iPod and a cocreator of the iPhone, told me that people "had to work as a group, not simply in one

meeting but possibly over weeks, to get him to change his mind or to see things from another angle." In the case of the iPhone, this argument continued for many months. Fadell and his engineers chipped away at the resistance by building early prototypes in secret, showing Jobs demos, and refining their designs.

Eventually, one big objection remained: The cell phone carriers controlled the networks, and they would force Apple to make a subpar product. Again the team appealed to Jobs's disagreeable tendencies: Could he get the carriers to do it his way? "If we had a powerful enough device," Fadell said, "he could get them to sign up to all of these terms that would remove all of those obstacles." Jobs saw the potential and ran with the idea, winning that battle. "Steve totally reset the relationship with the carriers," former Palm CEO and

Experience

Handspring cofounder Donna Dubinsky told me. "I always felt that this was his biggest accomplishment."

IN 1985, AFTER presiding over product launches that were technical wonders but sales busts, Steve Jobs was forced out of his own company. In 2005 he said, "It was awful-tasting medicine, but I guess the patient needed it." He learned that no matter how powerful his vision was, there were still times when he had to rethink his convictions. When he returned as CEO, it was not only with newfound openness but also with greater determination to hire people ready to challenge him and help him overcome his own worst instincts. That set the stage for Apple's resurgence.

Organizations need strong, visionary executives like Jobs. But they also need employees like Tony Fadell and Mike Bell, suppliers like Wendell Weeks, and stakeholders like the audience member who stood up to complain at Apple's developer conference—people who know how to effectively counteract bosses and colleagues who tend toward overconfidence, stubbornness, narcissism, or disagreeableness. In a turbulent world, success depends not just on cognitive horsepower but also on cognitive flexibility. When leaders lack the wisdom to question their convictions, followers need the courage to persuade them to change their minds. ☺

HBR Reprint R2102L



ADAM GRANT is an organizational psychologist at Wharton and the author of *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know* (Viking, 2021).