

How to Change a Mind: Yours and Others'

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why is it so hard to change people's minds? There are countless books and seminars that attempt to explain why — and then tell us how to be convincing, or to mount an effective argument. But arguing is often not the best way to change minds, no matter what the technique. Two researchers in the areas of Psychology and Organizational Development provide important insight into the challenges of changing people's thinking: Chris Argyris and William Bridges.

We learn from Argyris' theory of the “reflexive loop” that it's hard to change minds because once people form a belief, they're always seeking evidence that reinforces that belief. From Bridges, we learn that it's difficult to change people's minds because any attempt to do so incites fear of losing an important mechanism for how they organize and make sense of the world.

Listening for a Change is a practice that can overcome these barriers to changing people's minds. Paradoxically, this practice works best when we, the influencers, are also willing to suspend or set aside our own deeply held worldviews.

Listening for a Change includes a **strategy**, a set of **skills**, and a particular **attitude**. The strategy means paying attention to, and seizing, opportunities to influence what we encounter daily. We call these opportunities “Strategic Moments.” The skills include some standard interpersonal communication tools, plus one idea that may be brand new: “Bracketing.” The attitude equates to a belief in collaboration and openness that allows us to let go of getting our own way in order to improve a situation.

When our worldviews get us into trouble, we are ripe for weighing the merits of holding on to them or letting them go. At this moment, our minds can be influenced to change. There are three steps for influencing an individual who may be at this critical juncture. These are:

1. Recognize that circumstances have created dissonance between what someone believes should happen and what actually happens.
2. Adopt the attitude that you're open to altering your own conclusions in the course of exploring the issue.
3. Bracket your thoughts and feelings, replacing conviction with curiosity. Using listening techniques with an intention to create safety and openness. Then, when you advocate for your position, others may be willing to listen for a change themselves.

To put *Listening for a Change* into practice, we must demonstrate openness and a willingness to be changed by the interaction we undertake when we seek to influence others.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR INFLUENCE: MOLLY AND ELI

Eli Rittman manages sales reps in the Pacific Northwest for a global packaged goods company headquartered in Portland, Oregon. Molly Lassiter is the Pacific Northwest V.P. of Finance. An all-company e-mail greets employees reporting to work on Monday with news of a promotion: Jeff Schaefer, formerly the sales manager for the Midwest Region, has been named Eli's new boss, the Executive V.P. of Sales.

Having heard about the e-mail before he reached the elevator, Eli bypassed his own door and, without bothering to remove his coat, charged into Molly's office, closed the door and invited himself to a seat across the desk from her. Before Molly could shift her attention from the computer screen, he asked, with a mix of exasperation and disgust, "What the hell are they thinking?!"

How Molly responds could make a profound difference for Eli. If she responds reflexively, nothing changes. But if she responds strategically, there may be an opportunity for change. The people we characterize as "closed minded" often provide us with moments when the door to the mind we consider closed might be open, if just a crack, and only temporarily.

Advice on influencing others generally focuses on enhancing our ability to convince. Formulas for making a compelling argument range from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*¹. While a skillful argument can be a productive approach to influence, there are times when even the most articulate advocacy falls on deaf ears — or worse, encourages and fortifies opposition. Consider, for example, a political campaign ad attacking a candidate you strongly support. Will it convince you to change your mind, or cause you to dig in your heels?

The approach offered here invites you to consider what it takes to alter someone's thinking. Let's examine alternative methods Molly might use to influence Eli — with full acknowledgement of the irony intrinsic in trying to convince readers to be less convincing! I hope to demonstrate that changing someone's thinking requires a paradoxical openness to changing our own thinking.

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¹ Carnegie, Dale. *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. New York, Pocket, 1990.

THE CHALLENGES TO CHANGING OUR THINKING

Two researchers in the areas of Psychology and Organizational Development provide important insight into the challenges of changing our own and others' thinking. From Chris Argyris' work in *Overcoming Organizational Defenses*², we learn that the way we see the world is the result of self-reinforcing patterns of thought that ultimately distort how we take in information. The information we pick out from the world seems to constantly strengthen what we already believe is true. Have you ever marveled at how often you seem to be right about things? Consider how a self-reinforcing belief hardens Eli's impressions of Jeff Schaefer.

When Eli first joined the Regional Sales Directors' team and began attending staff meetings with his new peers, Eli paid close attention to how team members reviewed progress on their projects, answered questions from the boss, and outlined their weekly deliverables. Jeff Schaefer always took more time speaking than any of the others. He detailed his team's accomplishments and frequently emphasized his own contributions with comments like: "I focused them on the Mega Mart deal and, in the end, I was able to bring in the proposal two days ahead of the deadline," and "There's no telling what would have happened if I hadn't intervened with James before the presentation. The rest of you guys would have looked pretty silly going into the CEO's office with last year's numbers." Jeff's report-outs have always rubbed Eli the wrong way.

Eli holds a belief that people should be humble and gracious. They should let their good work speak for itself. Eli believes that self-aggrandizing, egocentric people will never get ahead in an organization that values teamwork. Given his world view, Eli is susceptible to forming a very quick negative conclusion about Jeff, who exhibits at least some behaviors which Eli detests. Once Eli has made up his mind about Jeff, a thought process that Argyris calls "the reflexive loop" takes over. The reflexive loop acts like a valve: it lets in data which corroborates what Eli believes about Jeff, while shutting out data inconsistent with his preconceptions. Eli's tuned in and attentive when Jeff behaves as expected; on the other hand, Eli fails to notice any behaviors that could disconfirm his belief. The reflexive loop accelerates the hardening of our emerging beliefs into deeply held convictions that get incorporated into our worldview. For example:

A few weeks after Eli joined the Sales Directors team, he and Molly find themselves in a meeting with Jeff and the Executive V.P. of Sales (Jeff and Eli's boss). Eli had come to confide in Molly and found her to be a great coach and friend. He walked with her to the meeting making it clear how much he dreaded the thought of listening to Jeff's latest accomplishments. After the meeting, Eli and Molly compared notes.

"Can you believe that guy?" Eli shook his head and then repeated one of Jeff's comments verbatim, but in a mocking tone, "My team has been singled out for a vendor award from Mega Mart."

² Argyris, Chris. *Overcoming Organizational Defenses; Facilitating Organizational Learning*. New York. Prentice Hall, 1990.

“He can get on my nerves,” Molly agreed. “On the other hand, did you see the quarterly numbers his Region posted? He’s doing something right.”

“I didn’t bother looking at them. He’s probably ‘gaming’ the numbers some way.” Eli went on. “How about when he dropped Frank Reinhold’s name? I thought I was going to puke.” Eli returned to his exaggerated Jeff imitation, “I bumped into Frank in the garage this morning and we talked for a good 20 minutes about the status of Mega Mart.”

This exchange points out how the reflexive loop works. Eli focuses on the data from the meeting that reinforces his opinion of Jeff, while discounting and/or ignoring other data about the meeting that provides a more balanced picture. You might think that more experience with someone would provide a more complete assessment of them. Unfortunately, we’re programmed to pay attention to the experiences that reassure us. We learn from Argyris that it’s hard to change our minds because, once we’ve formed a belief, we’re always seeing evidence that what we believe is true. We’re so certain of our beliefs, we create alternative explanations of data that makes sense to our worldviews:

“He’s probably gaming the numbers some way,” Eli concludes, without really thinking through the accusation.

William Bridges, who has written extensively on people’s reactions to change, notes that people don’t experience “change” per se. Instead, people move through a psychological process he refers to as “transition.”³ Transition, according to Bridges, starts with an ending, with a “letting go of something.” What we generally take to be resistance, according to Bridges, is really an emotional reaction to confronting the possibility that something we count on is going away. The absence of the familiar makes change frightening, not the imagined new reality. Consider for a moment how much you depend on your worldview to help you make sense of what you encounter each day. Most of what comprises your worldview has been set since your childhood, and is responsible for who you are and how others see you. Some of your worldview came on board more recently. The more central your worldview is to your self image, the scarier it would be for you to acknowledge the possibility that, without modification, it no longer serves you. We learn from Bridges that it’s hard to change someone’s mind, because of the fear of losing an important mechanism for how one makes sense of the world.

Taking the research of Argyris and Bridges together, it’s a miracle people ever change their minds about anything. On the one hand, the reflexive loop ensures that our experiences reinforce our beliefs. On the other hand, confronting the possibility that an aspect of our worldview no longer serves us means facing a fear of loss: the more central the belief, the more profound the loss.

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³ William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. New York: Perseus Books Group; 2nd edition. May, 2003.

Yet, we know that people can and do change their minds. If it's possible to alter our own thinking, it should be possible to alter the thinking of others. In fact, it turns out that substantive mind changing depends on a paradoxical supposition: we can influence someone's worldview only to the extent that our approach includes the possibility of altering our own worldview. Said another way, when our mind's made up, the minds we interact with don't change either.

HOW TO BE LESS CONVINCING AND MORE INFLUENTIAL

Equating influence with the ability to convince limits your options by at least half. An alternative worth considering I'll call "*Listening for a Change*." If convincing means "to win over," then, *Listening for a Change* means "to collaboratively explore." I characterize the difference by considering the intention or mission of the person seeking influence:

CONVINCING TO CHANGE

I want you to understand and consider what I'm saying.
I want you to adopt my point of view.

LISTENING FOR A CHANGE

I want to explore options with you. I want to make it safe to reconsider deeply held convictions.

Remember that we're focusing on influence when stakes are high for the person whose thinking we seek to alter. Garden variety persuasion in the form of compelling advocacy works great when we hope to influence someone who hasn't made up his mind (the game show contestant looking for advice from the studio audience) or for topics where we don't have much to lose if we change our minds (*I know you were counting on meatloaf tonight, honey. I'm exhausted; would you pick up a pizza on your way home?*).

Listening for a Change consists of a **strategy**, a set of **skills**, and a particular **attitude**. The strategy involves recognizing the opportunities to influence that we encounter daily. The skills include some standard interpersonal communication tools, well known to any successful leader, plus one idea that may be brand new. The attitude equates to a belief in collaboration and openness to helping improve things without necessarily getting our own way.

We'll take the strategy, skills and attitude of *Listening for a Change* one at a time. Before we do, take a moment to consider a relationship with an individual whose thinking you want to influence. As we look at the components of *Listening for a Change*, you'll have opportunities to reflect on the patterns of interactions you've had with the individual, and to plan an approach to future interactions that may make a difference.

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THE PARADOXICAL ATTITUDE THAT MAKES MIND CHANGING POSSIBLE

I start with attitude, because the strategy and skills won't work if your own worldview can't be altered. If "getting your way" is the only option from your point of view, read no further. You might want to re-read the sections on the "reflexive loop". Then ask yourself: Is "getting my way" really the answer for the situation I'm considering – and might I be missing some essential pieces of data?

Molly has believed for a long time that Eli's attitude toward Jeff would create problems. She's noticed that Eli avoids Jeff and that his usual affable behavior changes when he's forced into a meeting that includes Jeff. Molly considers it risky when Eli excludes Jeff. She wants to give him feedback that Eli's wish for Jeff to self-destruct may soon backfire. Molly's attitude toward influencing Eli's thinking will determine her approach to how she gives him feedback.

In reality, our attitudes span a spectrum of convictions. For illustrative purposes, let's consider the extremes:

CONVINCING TO CHANGE

Attitude:

Making Jeff an enemy is a big mistake. I've got to convince Eli to learn how to get along with Jeff.

Approach:

Listen, Eli, I know you think Jeff is obnoxious, but he's here to stay. I audit the numbers every week and his results are getting noticed. If I were you, I'd find a way to get along with him. Frankly, you're not hiding your disdain for him very well.

Likely Response:

Hey, I'm just being honest. If others want to encourage him with congratulations in public and then make fun of him in private, that's fine. I don't play those games. You can't tell me that I'm the only one who thinks he's a jerk.

LISTENING FOR A CHANGE

Attitude:

I wonder what's behind Eli's attitude toward Jeff? I think it's going to be counterproductive in the end, but maybe I'm missing something.

Approach:

Eli, I want to ask you about your relationship with Jeff. What is it exactly that bugs you about him?

Likely Response:

You mean other than being a loud, obnoxious, puffed up, jerk? I guess I just believe that bragging about your accomplishments in public is not being a team player. It's just flat wrong to take all the credit for yourself.

When Molly's mind is made up about what Eli needs to hear, she leads with an advocacy of her position. Since Eli no longer responds rationally to Jeff, it's likely Eli's worldview has been reinforcing itself. When Molly tells him to find a way to get along with Jeff, she's tapping into Eli's fear of losing a deeply-rooted belief that helps organize his operating system. It's not surprising that the response will be defensive, and probably will result in a frustrating point/counterpoint exchange.

When Molly allows herself to be curious rather than certain, she creates an opening for Eli to clarify his worldview without feeling that his worldview is at risk. Molly's curiosity leads to authentic inquiry, not loaded questions. When she starts with real questions, she gets to the heart of Eli's belief system. Now she can apply the skills of *Listening for a Change* to explore, in partnership with Eli, the belief system that drives his thoughts, feelings and behaviors about Jeff.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION ABOUT YOUR OWN SITUATION

Consider the individual you identified earlier, whose thinking you want to influence. Reflect on your own attitude about the situation and the individual.

- Do your interactions deteriorate into a series of point/counterpoint exchanges?
- Are you so convinced that you're right you have no curiosity about how the other person sees things?
- How much do you know about the other person's worldview with respect to the issue?
- If the person were to suddenly let go of his or her current way of thinking, what is at risk? What would be lost if the person publicly changed positions?
- If you were to let go of your current way of thinking, what would you lose? What's at risk for you to publicly change your mind?

Convincing relies on skillful advocacy. *Listening for a Change*, on the other hand, relies on skillful inquiry.

THE SKILL OF LISTENING FOR A CHANGE

If you're out to convince, you want to find the most compelling way to state your point of view. Convincing relies on skillful advocacy. *Listening for a Change*, on the other hand, relies on skillful inquiry. *Listening for a Change* creates openness — and safety — in order to surface and explore thoughts, feelings, and worldviews.

Many of the inquiry skills required to successfully *Listen for a Change* have been covered adequately in numerous articles and training courses on communication. The table below lists the key inquiry tools and gives examples of how to use them. "Bracketing" is the technique not generally covered elsewhere. To "bracket" means to recognize and set aside the initial thoughts and feelings that surface in response to something that somebody says or does. Poker players learn quickly to bracket their reactions to the cards they're holding. On the other hand, imagine any T.V. sitcom in which a character says something provocative, and the camera focuses on the reaction of another character.

TECHNIQUE	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Reflect	Confirm understanding by repeating the person's exact words.	Eli: <i>I don't think Jeff should have been promoted.</i> Molly: <i>So, you don't think Jeff should have been promoted.</i>
Paraphrase	Rephrase using your own words to confirm the person's meaning	Eli: <i>Jeff is grandiose and boastful and no one wants to work for someone like that.</i> Molly: <i>So what you're saying is that grandiose and boastful people shouldn't get promoted.</i>
Perception Check	Deepen your ability to support and empathize by checking out your belief about what the other person thinks or feels.	Eli: <i>This is the worst news ever!</i> Molly: <i>It sounds like you're frustrated and upset, is that right?</i>
Open-ended Questions	Probe for further information by asking a question that requires more than a one-word answer.	"What do you think should have been done?" "What are your ideas about this?"
Body Language	Increase the comfort level of the speaker by using your body – eyes, torso, and arms — in a way that is congruent with your words.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eye Contact • Leaning forward • Open palms when asking for input
Bracket	Internally, acknowledge and set aside your own advocacy, argument, point of view, or judgment, and become curious about the other person's point of view.	Eli: <i>This place stinks.</i> Molly (to herself): <i>He is overreacting, <u>and</u> I'm going to listen to him and let him speak his mind.</i>

Even though the second character reacts without a word, the audience laughs; what it finds amusing are the contents of the character's bracket. In the case of the sitcom, the bracket "leaks" intentionally, so we understand what's not being said. We can't stop our thoughts and feelings, but we can prevent them from influencing how we use the inquiry techniques listed in the table.

Let's go back to the moment when Eli explodes in Molly's office after finding out that Jeff has been promoted. Eli makes a provocative statement underscored by his tone and posture, "*What the hell are they thinking?!*"

Consider two scenarios of how Molly might react: one in which Molly allows her thoughts and feelings to drive how she responds, and a second version where Molly successfully brackets her thoughts and feelings.

MOLLY'S THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS	INQUIRY DRIVEN BY MOLLY'S THOUGHTS/ FEELINGS	INQUIRY WITH THOUGHTS/FEELINGS BRACKETED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I knew this was coming. • I'm angry that he's interrupting me. • Eli needs to learn that marketing yourself is the best way to get ahead around here. • I warned him to get along with Jeff. • I don't have time for this right now. 	<p><i>I told you that Jeff was getting impressive results. Were you expecting them to promote you?</i></p>	<p><i>I know you're shocked by the promotion. How would you have filled the opening?</i></p>

When Molly doesn't bracket, even a question can come across as a judgment. In the example above, both responses to Eli pose the same basic question. The first response conveys Molly's frustration as well as her own worldview about what it takes to get ahead. The second response shifts the focus from Molly's thoughts and feelings to Eli's thoughts and feelings, allowing curiosity to motivate the question rather than judgment.

Here's another, perhaps more familiar, example. My five year old daughter can ask me, "Why are you biting your fingernails?" While I may feel mildly embarrassed, I take the question at face value. My spouse asks me the same question, and I might be tempted to respond with, "At least I don't comb my hair at the dinner table!" In the first case, I perceive the question as a request for information. In the second case I perceive the question as a criticism. Bracketing allows us to exchange information, to focus on understanding, and to create safety for exploring thoughts and feelings.

It's one thing to define bracketing, it's quite another to know how to practice bracketing. It turns out that our attitude about influencing someone's thinking has everything to do with our ability to bracket our own thinking. If our attitude includes curiosity, bracketing will be easy. If our attitude includes a strong desire to be right or get our way, bracketing will be hard, and the strain of holding back our advocacy will be palpable.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION ABOUT YOUR OWN SITUATION

Think about the individual you identified earlier whose thinking you want to influence. Reflect on your own attitude about the situation and the individual.

- Recall a recent interaction on the topic about which you want to influence the individual's thinking. Would you describe the responses of the individual as “defensive?” Write down what you were thinking and feeling, and compare your thoughts and feelings to what you actually said. In what ways did your thoughts and feelings influence your choice of words?
- Re-write the interaction by taking your thoughts and feelings out of play. In other words, imagine how the conversation would have gone if you had bracketed your own thoughts and feelings. If you had allowed your conviction to be replaced by curiosity, what question would you have asked?

THE STRATEGY OF LISTENING FOR A CHANGE

It's only when our worldviews get us into trouble that we have the ability to weigh the merits of holding onto them. Eli's worldview allowed the rug to be pulled out from under him. He couldn't see what others in his company easily could have predicted: Jeff's the obvious choice for the Executive V.P. job. At the point in time when Eli expresses his dismay to Molly, a Strategic Moment arises for Molly — a possibility of influencing or even altering Eli's thinking.

The moment that Eli blows up is likely to be perplexing to Molly. She may feel stuck about what to do next, and how to do it. She may feel overwhelmed by the many choices she could make. At Interaction Associates, we call times like these *Strategic Moments*. During a Strategic Moment, we may be tempted to react impulsively.

But if we pause and reflect, we may be able to realize the potential embedded in a Strategic Moment.

Molly — or anyone — can recognize, seize, and take full advantage of the opportunity to influence by taking these three steps:

1. Recognize that circumstances have created dissonance between what someone believes should happen and what actually happens.
2. Adopt the attitude that you're open to altering your own conclusions in the course of exploring the issue.
3. Bracket your thoughts and feelings, replacing conviction with curiosity. Use listening techniques with an intention to create safety and openness. Once you have taken these steps, others will be more likely to listen to your alternative point of view.

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CONCLUSION

We've considered the anatomy of worldviews in an attempt to understand why minds rarely change. When an opportunity to influence someone's long standing beliefs presents itself, you'll need the right attitude and a set of listening skills in order to facilitate a change of mind. Everything written here about the worldviews of others applies to our own worldviews as well. When you're clear about the beliefs you hold and how they impact your understanding of the world, you'll be able to empathize with the challenges others face when confronting realities that don't add up for them.

Given the challenge of altering worldviews, it's highly unlikely that an article (which, by its very nature, doesn't allow for inquiry) will provide sufficient impetus to modify your underlying beliefs about how best to influence someone's thinking. What might work, on the other hand, would be a set of thoughts to augment or mitigate the ones you already have when you find yourself in a situation that calls for collaborative influence.

IF YOU'RE THINKING...

- I know what's really going on here.
- That's just like what happened to me; I think I should talk about my experience.
- I have two or three great ideas for what needs to happen.
- Can't they see their own responsibility for this mess?

CONSIDER THINKING...

- I have a hypothesis, but I may be mistaken.
- That sounds familiar; I can empathize with how it feels.
- I have some ideas, I wonder whether they've already been considered.
- I wonder how they view their role in all of this.

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Keith Johnstone, teacher, author, and iconoclastic authority on improvisational theater, offers a keen insight about the attitude required to listen for a change. Johnstone, in *Impro for Storytellers*, writes, "We shouldn't tell actors to listen. It just confuses them and they don't know what to do. Rather, we should say, be altered by what's said."⁴ If you want to change a mind, listen with an intention to be changed by what you hear. When we *Listen for a Change*, openness to being altered by what's said becomes contagious.

 **Interaction Associates** is a 40-year innovator helping global organizations build collaborative cultures and achieve excellence in a new measure of ROI —Return on Involvement —where employees go “beyond engagement” to share responsibility for business results. We develop leaders at all levels and focus on building proficiency in collaboration, strategic thinking, and self awareness. With offices in Boston and San Francisco, our services include organization-wide consulting, learning solutions, and coaching. For more info: www.interactionassociates.com

⁴ Johnstone, Keith. *Impro*. New York, Theatre Arts Books, 1979.