Of Persuasion in Leadership

Robert B. Cialdini, a well-known social psychologist, suggested six strategies:

1. Liking
   People tend to listen and comply when they like someone or are led to believe they know or like them. Consistent with the similarity-attraction paradigm—individuals are more attracted to similar others. In an organisation, leaders tend to have greater influence on others they feel good about themselves. Leaders are thus encouraged to foster liking. Leaders may also consider making their presence in a meeting evident to others (e.g. through face-to-face interaction), and thereby influence subordinates.

2. Commitment and Consistency
   Individuals are more willing to comply with requests for actions that are consistent with their own action or position. Leaders are encouraged to lead by example through their exceptionally high energy and commitment towards their roles and organisation. Giving voluntary and public commitments signals support to the employees that the leaders are reliable, and the employees are more likely to comply.

3. Scarcity
   People are more willing to comply with requests for actions that are scarce. For instance, a uniquely exciting work task given to a select group of employees induces a sense of privilege. To further exploit the perception of scarcity, charismatic leaders could explicitly communicate to their employees about the rare chance and the potential losses if a particular opportunity is missed.

4. Reciprocity
   Individuals are obliged to return a favour to someone who has helped them. Leaders are thus encouraged to show respect and appreciation in order to expect the same from their subordinates. For instance, employees stay with an organisation because they feel that they should return the favour (e.g. trust and recognition by their leaders). Employees perceive that their departure is immoral if they have been given such good treatment. Hence, leaders’ actions foster the impression that they and their mission are extraordinary.

5. Social Validation
   People want to engage in the same actions or thinking as the similar others in order to feel correct. This is evident especially when dealing with a charismatic leader. In one of their published journal articles, Dr. C. Conger and Katsuhiko Kanungo explained, “Charismatic leaders are different from other leaders by their ability to transform subordinates. They can provide inspiration and vision and by behaviors and actions that foster belief in the impression that they and their mission are extraordinary.”

   Based on the social categorisation theory, followers of charismatic leaders want to identify with their leaders so that they feel good about themselves. The charisma of a leader can be transmitted to followers, which in turn influences their work behaviours. This suggests that charismatic leaders are more likely to be inspirational, and thereby influence subordinates through internalisation of the leader’s vision and beliefs.

6. Authority
   People are more willing to comply with requests by someone who has legitimate authority. Barack Obama's Kenan from Harvard Business School emphasises personal credibility and power as the main factors to stay influential. Based on the social power theory, there are two major types of power: harsh and soft. The differentiation between harsh and soft bases of power is dependent on the amount of autonomy one has over the choice of whether to comply or not. Recent research shows that followers of charismatic leaders are more likely to respond positively to soft power bases by being more committed to the organisation.

   In other words, followers tend to comply with requests by transformational leaders because they feel good about themselves. Leaders who possess soft power bases are more influential than those who possess harsh power bases.

Influence or persuasion may take place at various levels within an organisation. C-level and senior management should not be the only ones to exert influence and build inter-departmental teamwork, a social capital across multiple stakeholders, an inter-organisational charisma. A good leader getting their members to listen to him, or a salesperson closing a deal at a price that is higher than the market price.

In his book, Cialdini suggested six strategies to influence others to say “yes.”

- 1. Show genuine concern to their employees to foster liking.
- 2. Be committed to their work and influence their employees through exemplary behaviours.
- 3. Explicitly communicate the value of the new task or role and employees’ responsibilities.
- 4. Engage in good deeds for employees.
- 5. Be a role model for employees through charismatic leadership.
- 6. Practice soft bases of power.

These are strategies leaders ought to master in order to be a signal leader who is able to influence followers in the right direction.