



# Persuasive Presentations VS "The Idea Killers"

**BY GREGORY PETERSON**

Good ideas -- even terrific ideas -- often fail to get adopted when an advocate lacks the verbal communication skills to make persuasive presentations. As every public speaker knows, no two presentations are exactly alike -- but for the most part, the reasons a verbal communication fails to persuade are both predictable and preventable.

**That's the premise of "Buy-In," a new Harvard Business Review Press title by Professors John Kotter and Lorne Whitehead.**

What's exciting about this book on effective advocacy is the sheer practicality of its prescribed approach to develop the power of persuasion. It's approach to advocacy is simple and memorable -- yet often overlooked by public speakers, despite their desire to deliver more persuasive, more effective presentations.

In essence, the book proposes a kind of "aikido" -- a direct (but non-confrontational) approach to persuasion that anticipates verbal communication attacks and deflects an opponent's challenges. *Armed with this knowledge, your good idea can have a "fighting chance" -- but without the fighting.*

## Address Public Personas To Strengthen Persuasive Presentations

The authors' insightful theory and practical public speaking tips are reason enough to invest your time and treasure in this book. It provides something more, however: an excellent example of targeting individual character types for more persuasive presentations. We call these personality types "public personas." These are the people who are crucial to your success -- whether your current "role" reflects commercial, civic or personal matters. Depending on the issues at hand, these personas may be members of your community, elected officials, corporate directors or any other group with influence over a certain aspect of your affairs. You need their cooperation and you value their goodwill. So think long and hard about who these people really are -- and see what happens when you approach communications strategy with "relational" goals, not just "transactional" aims. In a social media environment, this relationship-oriented communications approach can make a significant difference.)



## The “Buy-In” Personas

### Persuasion Through Storytelling

“Buy-In” uses a story-based format to bring these personas to life, and to demonstrate the threats they pose to persuasive presentations. The book’s narrative thread pulls the reader into a persuasion scenario, as each of these “idea-killers” takes center stage and threatens to short-circuit the hero’s journey towards a successful performance. This storyline bringing the characters to life highlights a crucial point: An audience’s challenges to a public presentation often are not mean-spirited or deeply oppositional. Rather, the personas are simply archetypal characters acting in predictably human ways -- sometimes exhibiting an aversion to risk, other times being critical in an attempt to demonstrate their intelligence, and still other times just not welcoming another change in their lives. The personas need your reassurance, recognition and respect -- even when they’re behaving disrespectfully. By steeping ourselves in the “Buy-In” story narrative, we learn how to accommodate these personas’ questions (whether well-meaning or destructive) and to respond in ways that move us towards our persuasion goals. We learn to welcome the audience challenges, and to use these attacks to generate emotional engagement that furthers our advocacy goals.

## The Heart Of Persuasion? Effective Communication.

In describing their method for persuasive communication and effective advocacy, the authors list eight steps for achieving effective large-scale change. Although each of these elements is important, it is the fourth of these steps (Communicate For Buy-In) that they consider most important in overcoming obstacles to persuasion.

The single biggest mistake that people make when trying to communicate a new vision of change, and strategies for achieving that vision, is under-communicating by a great deal. What seems like a lot of communication to those driving a change effort can, in fact, be woefully little...

Although some of the communications advice you'll find here may seem self-evident (even simplistic) consider that the methodology deliberately embraces those "unsophisticated" qualities. This process, after all, is designed to enhance your verbal communication skill in the chaos of real-world situations -- not the rational world of academic debate. When you're under fire, simple strategies can serve you very well indeed.

## Four "Idea Killers" Prevent Persuasive Presentations.

Although there may seem to be an endless variety of arguments capable of preventing an effective verbal presentation, the authors found that these all can be condensed into four "idea killers."

- **Confusion**
- **Death By Delay**
- **Fear Mongering**
- **Ridicule And Character Assassination**

"That's it?" you're wondering. "Four simple "buckets" to account for death of all the good ideas that never really had a chance?" Admittedly, this is a pared-down system -- but give it a chance. Once adopted, these categories provide a surprisingly robust "real-time" framework for evaluating incoming attacks. You hear the criticism, channel it into the appropriate category and deliver a response that is pre-determined to advance your persuasion goals.

## 24 Predictable Verbal Communication Attacks

Next time you are preparing a presentation for your directors, your colleagues or your community, set aside a couple of hours to skim this book and run your proposal through its list of the 24 common verbal communication challenges. A few examples are listed below, and you can watch Professor Kotter discuss some of these attacks online .

1. "We've been successful. Why change?"
2. "Money (or some other problem a proposal does not address) is the only real issue."
3. "You exaggerate the problem."
4. "You're implying that we've been failing!"
5. "What's the hidden agenda here?"

(A complete list of verbal communication challenges -- and responses -- is available at the Kotter International website .)

## What If Your Idea Simply Isn't Persuasive?

If your idea truly is a good one, it deserves all the persuasive skill you can muster. But if your idea should prove to be flawed? (It happens!) In that unfortunate case, wouldn't you prefer to uncover the problems in an environment where you've done everything possible to promote respectful dialogue and to preserve relationships? "Buy-In" will help you adopt the mindset that you can (and should) confidently "face the lions" to learn how your idea might be improved -- and to be authentically open to the question of whether it even merits further consideration. Paradoxically, welcoming the attacks will ensure that your idea doesn't die an unnecessary death.

"Respect" is a key word for achieving genuine persuasion and buy-in -- and it goes without saying that this quality is sorely lacking in most public discourse today. One of the most attractive aspects of the authors' approach is that it goes beyond the transactional, "win-at-all-costs" approach that often leaves bad decisions and broken relationships in its wake. Rather, the book counsels the use of persuasive communication skills that preserve relationships. Why is this so important? Both for its own sake, and also because a proposed idea that wins acceptance requires the goodwill and support of former-opponents once you seek to actually implement it.