



Richard Wallace
Managing Director

3 Rules for Getting Through to Anyone

Managers, CEOs, and salespeople often tell me “Talking to so-and-so is like hitting a brick wall.” Keith Ferrazzi, author of *Who’s Got Your Back*, says “Stop hitting your head against the wall and look for the loose brick.”

Have you noticed that some people have a knack for getting through to people, convincing them to buy into their plans, goals and desires?

It may seem like magic, but it really isn’t. The art of persuasion is easier to learn than you may think.

When you look for and find that “loose brick” — what the other person really needs from you — you can tear down even the strongest barriers and connect with people in ways you never thought possible.

Right now, if you’re like most, there are a few people in your life to whom you can’t seem to get through. They may be team members, subordinates, clients or maybe even your boss. Perhaps it’s a partner or spouse, defiant teen or angry “ex.”

You try persuasion, logic, pleading, and bargaining, but you hit a wall every time. The more you try, the more your efforts backfire.

Most people, when faced with resistance, up-shift to higher gears. They speak louder, persuade harder, encourage, cajole, and then argue and push. The end result is greater resistance.

When you do the opposite, however — when you just listen, ask, mirror and reflect back to people what you hear — you’ll achieve the results you seek. You’ll start to get through to the people you need to reach, no matter how difficult they can be.

Why People Don’t Hear You

Almost all communication is an effort to get through to people and influence them to do something different.

The problem, however, is that people have their own needs, desires and agendas. They have secrets they don’t want to share with you. They’re stressed, busy and often overwhelmed. To cope, they throw up impenetrable mental bar-



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ricades, even if they share your goals.

The Persuasion Cycle

In *Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone*, psychiatrist Mark Goulston shares some of the techniques hostage negotiators use in the most desperate situations. They also work well for reaching a boss, coworker, client, spouse or angry teenager.

As Goulston notes, persuasion moves through a cycle:

- ▶ From resisting to listening
- ▶ From listening to considering
- ▶ From considering to willing to do
- ▶ From willing to do to doing
- ▶ From doing to glad they did and continuing to do

Buy-in begins when people move from resisting to listening to considering what you're saying. How do you get a person to go from the critical stage of resisting to listening? First, you listen to them.

An understanding of three concepts will allow you to see what's happening in someone's head when you're trying to achieve buy-in:

- ▶ 1. The three-part brain (reptile, mammal, upper primate/human)
- ▶ 2. The "amygdala hijack"
- ▶ 3. Mirror neurons (and the mirror neuron deficit)

The Three-Part Brain

Our brains evolved from lower animals:

- ▶ Our primitive reptilian brain remains responsible for split-second survival reactions (i.e., the "freeze, fight or flight" response).
- ▶ The middle mammalian brain is the seat of emotions, where the "inner drama queen" reigns.
- ▶ The upper primate/human brain is personified by Star Trek's Mr. Spock. It weighs a situation logically and generates a conscious plan of action. It collects data from the reptile and mammal brains, analyzes it, and makes practical, ethical decisions.

Often, however, we don't engage the upper brain faculties until it's too late and damage has been done. To a small extent, these three brains work together, but they also function inde-

pendently, especially under stress. This is what happens when people shift, becoming difficult and hard to reach.

The Amygdala Hijack

The amygdala is a part of the brain that processes memory and emotional reactions (especially fear and anger).

When it takes over, the primitive reptile brain runs the show, and surges of adrenaline keep us from thinking clearly over the next few minutes — an effect that may take hours to fade.

The term "amygdala hijack," first coined by psychologist Daniel Goleman, refers to what happens under acute stress.

When you try to reason with someone in a full amygdala hijack, you're wasting your time. You must speak to him before the hijack occurs — or talk him down from it using empathy.

Mirror Neurons

Years ago, when scientists were studying Macaque monkeys' brains, they found that specific nerve cells fired when the monkeys threw a ball or ate a banana. To their surprise, these same cells fired when one monkey watched another perform these acts.

When the brain's "mirror neurons" fire, we have the ability to be transported into another person's mind, briefly making us feel what the other person is experiencing. These cells are nature's way of teaching us to care about other people.

Neurologist V.S. Ramachandran, director of the Center for Human Information Processing at the University of California, San Diego, calls them "empathy neurons" or "Dalai Lama neurons," as they dissolve the barriers between self and others.

Most of us want to be heard and understood by others. We're willing to be touched if someone breaks through the walls we erect to avoid being hurt or controlled.

In the workplace, this may prove challenging, as we worry about being inappropriate or intrusive. We don't want to risk delving too deeply into someone's emotions.

As a result, Goulston suggests that many of us suffer from a "mirror neuron receptor deficit." Many CEOs and managers feel they give their best, only to be met day after day with apathy, hostility, or worse, no response at all. Their brains don't get enough mirror neuron receptor activity. In other words, there's not enough empathy going around the office.

3 Core Rules for Getting Through to People

“These days we’re experts at ‘hot-syncing’ — getting different pieces of technology, like BlackBerrys and PCs, to talk to each other. Few of us, however, are experts when it comes to hot-syncing with other people.” —Mark Goulston

You probably already know how to handle a tense situation intelligently. You wouldn’t be in your position today if you didn’t. At least subconsciously, you’re experienced in going from attack mode to emotional mode to smart mode.

Every difficult conversation involves your reptile, mammalian and human brains. Unfortunately, much of your wisdom lies buried in your instincts. You can’t always access what’s required to manage tense emotions at the precise moment you need it.

Typically, a few minutes after a stressful encounter, your pulse and breathing start to slow, and you calm down a little. Shortly thereafter, you gain enough self-control to begin reviewing your options. And later, you start thinking, “There’s a smart way to resolve this so everybody wins.”

But if you’ve reacted with harsh words in the heat of the moment, you may have already screwed up a sale, alienated a coworker or lost someone’s esteem.

Rule 1: Move from “Oh, F#@&!” to “OK”

In a stressful encounter, you may have less than two minutes to gain control and salvage the situation—a slender window of opportunity that gives you an advantage over everyone else in the room. You’ll be the only person who’s thinking straight.

Goulston recommends a five-step mental process during such crises, whether you’re dealing with a fender-bender, an enraged teenager or a work situation:

- ▶ 1. “Oh, F#@&!” (Reaction Phase): “This is a disaster. I’m screwed. What just happened? It’s all over.”
- ▶ 2. “Oh, God!” (Release Phase): “This is a huge mess. I’m stuck with it. Why does this always happen to me?”
- ▶ 3. “Oh, Jeez!” (Re-Center Phase): “All right, I can fix this, but it’s not going to be fun.”
- ▶ 4. “Oh, Well...” (Refocus Stage): “I’m not going to let this ruin my life/career/day/relationship. Here’s what I need to do right now to make it better.”
- ▶ 5. “OK.” (Reengage Phase): “OK, I’m ready to fix this. Let’s go.”

Goulston is not saying that you can solve a crisis in two minutes. You can’t. But you can think your way through to possible solutions quickly. These mental steps give you a way to create

a path out of panic mode and into solution mode. You’ll then be able to say the right things instead of making things worse.

Rule 2: Rewire Yourself to Listen

Many of us don’t listen well, especially with the people we deal with each day. We think we already know what they’re going to say.

As a result, we mistake insecurity for arrogance, fear for stubbornness and legitimate anger for a dismissive “he’s just a jerk.” We talk around, over and up against people, with little actual listening to them.

We often size people up instantly, forming some pretty good first impressions. The problem is, these impressions last forever, and many are a jumbled mix of fact, fiction, prejudice and unconscious intuitions. They affect our conversations with others for months or even years to come.

We use the following filters to put people in mental boxes before we really know them:

- ▶ Gender (and all the stereotypes that go with it...)
- ▶ Generation (age)
- ▶ Ethnic background (names, skin color, accent, etc.)
- ▶ Education (level, manner of speaking)
- ▶ Looks (dress, hair, body size, style)

Check your filters, and examine how well you truly hear what someone is saying.

Rule 3: Make the Other Person Feel “Felt”

Put yourself in the other person’s shoes so you can change the dynamics of a relationship in a heartbeat. In that instant, you “get” each other, and this breakthrough leads to cooperation, collaboration and effective communication.

When you mirror what another person feels, she’s hardwired to mirror you in return. When you say, “I understand what you’re feeling” — and you mean it — she will feel grateful and, in return, express her appreciation with a desire to understand you. It’s an irresistible biological urge that pulls another person toward you.

Inside every angry person is a scared or nervous soul in need of empathy. If you ignore this person’s feelings, you’ll keep hitting the same brick wall of anger, antagonism or apathy.

When you make the person feel “felt,” you’re likely to transform yourself from a stranger or enemy to a friend and ally. You’ll get less attitude and obstruction, more support and an improved chance to get your message through. If this sounds too simple to be true, go ahead and try it out for yourself.

Phrases for Difficult Conversations

Use these phrases to help someone feel “felt”:

- ▶ “I’m trying to get a sense of what you’re feeling, and I think it’s _____ (fill in an emotion). Is that correct?” Listen without judgment or comment.
- ▶ “What are you feeling?”
- ▶ “How frustrated (angry, upset, etc.) are you?” Allow the person to vent.
- ▶ “And the reason you’re so frustrated (angry, upset) is because (repeat back to them what they’ve told you).” Again, let the person vent.
- ▶ “Tell me, what needs to happen for that feeling to be better?” Listen without judgment or argument.
- ▶ “What part can I play in making this happen? What part are you willing to play?”

This script isn’t written in stone. These phrases are meant to be guides or starting points for breaking through to someone. The goal is to move them from barricading to feeling “felt”—from resisting to listening, from listening to considering.



- » P.O. Box 382494
- » Birmingham, AL 35238
- » www.osmconsulting.com

