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New skills New influence.

Jane Henderson

ABSTRACT

Conservators and those charged with responsibility for collections care are often required to try to change the way that most people in their institutions work and think. Yet conservators are often seen as poor communicators. This paper argues that this can change and identifies one feature of communication science, persuasion, that can be studied and learnt by conservators to increase their positive influence within the organisations in which they work.

Key Words

preventive conservation, communication, power, negotiation, change, persuasion, influence, receivers, messages, source

PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION NEW RESPONSIBILITIES

Alongside the predictable advances in techniques, an unexpected phenomena in conservation in recent years has been 'preventive conservation'. Whether instigated for budgetary or philosophical reasons this has proved to be an effective investment in caring for collections.

Those responsible for preventive conservation, or collections care, have a huge task. In order to implement preventive conservation strategies conservators are often charged with introducing new ideas and practices which can effect entire institutions. For example: reducing light levels may involve the designers; pest monitoring may involve the cleaners; environmental control may involve building services and handling of collections can include attendants, educators and curators. Add the finance department's concern with budgets and personnel's involvement with job descriptions and it becomes clear that attempting to improve collections care can involve the whole organisation (Staniforth, 1996:3).

Yet if preventive conservation requires a change both in practice and policy then conservators, many of whom were recruited for their technical skills, must re-evaluate their roles in the formation of policies and the management of their organisation's resources.

Conservators and Communication

Unfortunately, the traditional view is that conservators are not team players, 'Many necessary [conservation] measures are negative ones – "thou shalt not" – and attempting to implement them unfortunately gives conservators a reputation for being negative spoil sports.' (Keene, 1996:112). Conservators also have a reputation for being poor communicators. 'Having grown up on the defensive, conservation has often sought shelter in an unattractive hectoring tone' (Drysdale, 1988:19).

As a result these new responsibilities which rely heavily on communication may sit uneasily with the traditional skills and attitudes of many conservators. Those responsible for collections care, usually conservators, are being encouraged to introduce change into heritage organisations and yet appear ill equipped for the task.

CHANGING COMMUNICATION PRACTICE

A full and rounded study of how change can be instigated by conservators, working in a multitude of environments, would be a fascinating task. It would also be an enormous one. Issues of organisational culture and relationships, traditional management theory, interpersonal relationships, power, negotiation skills, traditional roles, communication, motivation and persuasion are all areas that have generated enormous research. In order to simplify the scope of study for conservators who wish to initiate change I have chosen to

discuss how conservators in most organisations could bring about the changes necessary to improve and maintain collections care.

Initiating Change & Influence

Initiating change is one of the most common reasons why any individual in an organisation tries to *influence* their colleagues (Kipnis *et al*, 1980). Conservators who wish to initiate change could learn from other people's attempts and as change and influence are clearly interrelated, the process of gaining influence must be investigated. Theories of influence could also help shed light on the influence that conservators currently have in their organisations. Given the negative stereotypes that exist, conservators must learn both how to have a more positive and effective influence in their organisations, and how to reduce any unconscious negative influence that they exert.

Influence can be achieved in a number of ways. Conservators know they need to be influential, but how do they go about it? Those in power in an organisation, for example, will find influence easy as their edicts will normally be obeyed.

POWER & INFLUENCE

Conservators who want to participate in the decision making functions of their organisations may consider the pursuit of power as the simplest route to implementing change. Cody & McLaughlin (1990:16) argue that truly powerful people 'need use very few influence attempts' as people will simply comply with their instructions. In this respect the relationship seems simple: power equals persuasion. Other researchers have defined the ability to influence as *part* of their definition of power (Cartwright, 1970:5). In each case the influence may still be described as originating from the power, rather than any specific skill of the individual.

Powerful Conservators?

The conservator in a museum is, however rarely in a position of power (Corfield *et al*, 1987:32). Whilst there is little data available, observation and existing research suggests that conservators are not rising through the ranks within organisations, a point highlighted in Suzanne Keene's (1996:41-42) observations:

'Why are conservators apparently little interested in the management of their work? Many of the posts are relatively junior, and hence they have little influence in their organisations. Many of them entered the profession because they enjoyed the actual practical treatment of objects; they prefer this to tackling the wider, less practical, and often less immediate issues of collections preservation. It will probably always be the exception to find an equal aptitude for these very difficult tasks in the same person.'

Note that here Keene makes the correlation between status and influence, as power or status is the most obvious route to influence.

In a recent survey of UK conservators conducted by the Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC), conservators were asked to define their primary roles. Only 8% defined themselves as performing 'a predominantly managerial or senior administrative role' (Winsor & Greenblatt, 1998:12). Given that this definition may include those who manage conservation departments, but are not part of the formal management structure of their organisation, it is possible to conclude that it is not the common experience of conservators to be in management positions.

Another developing tendency is for organisations to 'out source' much of their conservation requirements (Winsor & Greenblatt, 1998:22) (Keene, 1996:41-41). The MGC's DOMUS survey of every registered museum in the UK showed that 50% of museums contracted work to independent conservators whilst 31% of museums contracted work to conservators in the area museum council (MGC, 1998). Approximately half of all UK conservators are from the private sector (Leigh, 1985:237), some of whom offer collections care

advice at management levels. Some argue that these outside advisers are best placed to influence an organisation as they are perceived as having some 'expert power' (Frost, 1994:21) whilst others argue that outside conservators are effectively limited to restoration (Ward 1989:4). In both cases, a contract worker brought in for a specific project, in a specific time frame, will not be permanently integrated into the power structures of the organisation.

Whether employed as staff or as a consultant, conservators are rarely powerful enough to influence the long term behaviour of an organisation simply because of their status.

It can be seen, therefore, that there are many conservators who do not aspire to, or expect, power (Paterson, 1988:16) and cannot pursue influence through this route. Therefore it is more useful to concentrate on the question raised by Cody and McLaughlin (1990:4): 'how [do] powerless actors influence others?'

NEGOTIATION

Bargaining and negotiation are commonly used to both resolve disputes and to encourage change and when power does not exist, may seem the most obvious strategy. Bargaining is normally a formal activity, with clear understanding of rules of conduct. It involves mutual concessions, normally involves parties being represented and is used to settle intergroup or interorganisational conflicts (Miller 1999:202).

In negotiation there is a concept of exchange, but in terms of preventive conservation this concept is not helpful. Exchanging requirements in a negotiation situation may be taken to mean 'giving permission for objects to be displayed or housed in conditions that are less than optimal.' (Keene, 1996:112). Objects do not have personalities or subjective needs that can be redefined at a bargaining table. Instead, objective conditions exist which damage collections but these cannot be redefined in order to agree a deal. There are ways of implementing collections care strategies that consider wider agendas and do not rule out co-operation or discussion of priorities. However, what is required is not the formal trading of requirements, but development of strategies for the incorporation of standards into practice in an acceptable way. Furthermore negotiating or trading requirements is a less helpful approach than a reassessment of goals by all parties and agreement on alternative routes to find the best outcome for the institution. Negotiation alone as a tactic for influence is not helpful, although many techniques associated with negotiation are useful as part of wider persuasion strategies.

PERSUASION

The question therefore for the majority of conservators responsible for collections care is how people without significant power, or an expectation that they will automatically be obeyed, can gain influence. If power is not an option and negotiation is unsuitable, *persuasion* is a means of pursuing policy objectives that remains available.

Persuasion - The Good News

Research shows that there is a tendency for people to comply with requests if they are provided with a reason (*persuaded*) to do so. Cialdini (1993:3-5) describes experiments carried out by social psychologist Ellen Langer which looked into a person's ability to talk others into letting them jump the photocopier queue. When she asked people if she could jump the queue 'because she only had five pages' and 'because she was in a rush' she was allowed to do so in 94% of occasions, compared with only 60% when she didn't say 'because she was in a rush'.

It would appear that the other queuers reviewed her reason, 'being in a rush', compared it with the fact that she only had five copies and agreed to the request. However the researcher then set up the same situation but the request was re-phrased that she only had five pages with the qualification 'because I have to make some copies'. With this explanation the compliance rate was 93%. The conclusion drawn was not that the other queuers needed a meaningful reason to comply but that they simply needed a 'reason'. This presents an

optimistic basis for a conservator concerned that their lack of power is a major disadvantage: people are in general inclined to comply with requests when given a reason (persuaded to do so).

Learning to be Persuasive

The need for conservators to be effective communicators has been identified in the conservation literature (Cronyn & Pye, 1988:23, Foley, 1992:20, Morris, 1990:21 & Watkinson 1992:7). Some limited facets of communication, such as presentation skills (Ashley Smith, 1990:19) or the use of standards are reported (Cassar & Keene, 1990:14), but there is less literature that examines the more complex interpersonal persuasive activities necessary for collections care.

Having identified persuasion as the best tactic for initiating change conservators may wish to have a pocket guide with 'ten top tips for persuasion', but unfortunately persuasion is situational and the best strategies will be dependent on circumstance.

I believe that persuasion is the most effective influence agent available to conservators in terms of introducing collection care practices. People can dismiss recommendations to attempt to improve their influencing skills as pseudo science best relegated to self help manuals. Others may see persuasive abilities as a gift or an immutable personality trait, but persuasion is also a skill that once understood can be learnt.

There is little written about the methods conservators have used to improve their communication skills in order to be more persuasive. The skill of persuasion is to learn to recognise persuasive encounters where they exist and to be able to breakdown and analyse each element, in order to change and improve things. The advantage of focusing on persuasion is that it does not necessarily require a shift in power, but can instead focus on factors that are within the control of the average conservator. Unfortunately some fixed factors such as gender (Burgoon, 1995:43-44) and personal attractiveness (Johnston, 1994:155) can influence decision makers but there are many other variables that can be investigated and manipulate by conservators.

What is Persuasion?

Pfau and Parrott (1993:6) cite Miller in their definition of persuasion as 'the shaping, changing, or reinforcing of receivers' responses... including attitudes, emotions, intentions, and behaviours'.

Persuasive situations are ones where 'attempts are made to modify behaviour by symbolic transactions (messages) that are sometimes, but not always, linked with coercive forces (indirectly coercive) and then appeal to the reason and emotions of the intended persuadee(s).' (Miller 1980:15). There are three possible outcomes from a successful persuasion encounter and these can be summarised as:

- changing existing responses
- reinforcing existing responses
- shaping new responses

(Miller, 1987:451).

Unconscious Persuasion

Sometimes the receiver of a message can react in a way that is unintended by the source. Cialdini (1993:2) provides an example where a jeweller's instructions to an assistant to half the price of goods in order to clear them were misunderstood, and the price was doubled. To everyone's surprise the jewellery then sold much faster than at its original price. This unconscious act was nonetheless persuasive. Other factors that affect persuasion can be unconscious, such as the appearance of the persuader, the receiver's expectations, gender differences etc., accordingly, persuasion covers both unconscious and conscious persuasion attempts. Conservators should be aware that their unconscious acts, such as failing to participate in events or styles of communication can have a negative persuasive impact in apparently unrelated encounters. They should also remember that the result of a deliberate persuasive attempt can easily be the opposite from that intended.

The Drip Drip Drip Tactic: Persuasion Over Time

Persuasive communication campaigns are defined as conscious, sustained, incremental communication efforts, using multiple messages over time seeking to achieve defined persuasive goals (Pfau and Parrott, 1993:ix). Conservators planning collections care strategies must sustain just such an ongoing relationship. The point to note is that persuasion is, in this situation, an incremental activity. 'Persuasion involves considerable patience and a talent for identifying how far an individual can be encouraged to move at any particular point in time.' (Reardon, 1991:4). In the context of a conservator's attempts to establish good practice in museums, the idea of compromise, which is a central feature of negotiation, could be replaced with the concept of taking incremental steps to persuasive goals.

As with most communication, persuasive attempts are inherently reciprocal (Berger, & Burgoon, 1995:xi). 'Persuasion is something people do with each other, not to each other,' (Reardon, 1991:65). This view of an interactive process of persuasion fits with a general shift in social sciences towards explaining behaviour in terms of interactive communicative processes and away from explaining it in terms of fixed structures such as personality traits (Parks, 1995:169). Therefore, it is necessary to consider the whole process of communication in order to understand the dynamics of persuasion. A dialectical grasp of the elements and the process of persuasion are necessary to understand how to analyse and construct successful persuasive situations.

The three critical elements in a persuasive encounter are the persuader or source (the conservator), the persuasive message (lower the light levels) and the persuadee or receiver (designer). In order to be an effective persuader it is necessary to try to assess all three factors at once in the context of the persuasive encounter. Alternatively conservators who find that they are not successful persuaders could analyse their circumstances and past efforts in order to look for factors that they could change in the future.

Unfortunately a full discussion of each element that can affect the outcome of a persuasive encounter would be larger than is allowed for the whole paper.

The Components of a Persuasive Encounter

Initially researchers regarded persuasion as a linear process where source (conservator), message (lower the light levels) and receiver (designer) form a simple continuum (Berger, & Burgoon, 1995:ix-x). This linear understanding suited passive, one (source) to many (receivers) persuasive situations, where there was no feed back between source and receiver, such as a politician making a speech or a television commercial. Neither of these situations is very similar to a conservator trying to persuade their colleague to change their behaviour and so results from such experiments are often of little use in understanding such a process and how it might be used by conservators.

An alternative to the linear view has been developed and is described as the transactional (change actions) model of persuasion (Pfau and Parrott 1993:9). This model (Fig. 1), emphasises the interactive nature of persuasion in which receivers play a role (Pfau & Parrott, 1993:53).

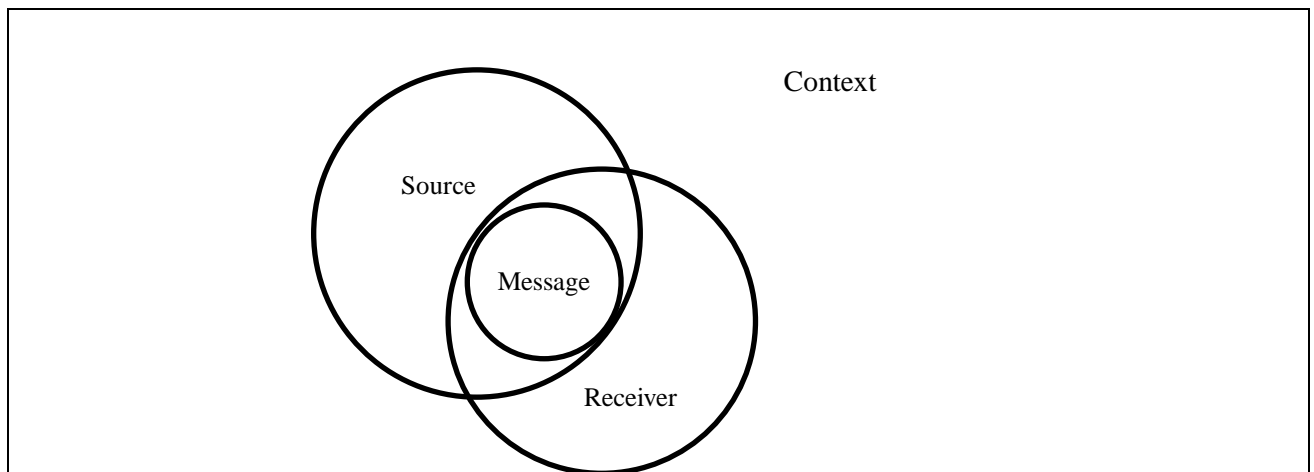


Figure 1 A Transactional Model of Persuasion Campaigns after Pfau & Parrott, 1993:9

The separate elements of the persuasion process can be studied individually, but when they are put together they lose their distinction and are shaped by, and shape, each other. The conclusion is that the impact on the likelihood of compliance will always be dependant on the interaction of all the features in the persuasive encounter. So the outcome of the conservator trying to persuade the designer about light could be affected by the personality or status of either, the language used or whether the encounter took place at a design meeting or over a drink in the pub.

The Person or People you are Trying to Persuade

Receivers of messages are rarely ‘empty vessels’ into which suggestions can be poured resulting in gratifying changes of attitude. Instead the way that a receiver hears and relates to messages can be a complex process.

‘Individual receivers respond to persuasive messages based on specific circumstances... Some receivers can be reached by more rational appeals, while others require more emotional appeal, and responses vary depending on message content and context.’ (Pfau & Parrott, 1993:53)

The debate as to whether people are largely rational beings - subject to reasoned appeals, or basically irrational - thus vulnerable to deceptive and emotional appeals, goes back to classical Greece (Pfau & Parrott, 1993:48). In reality there are a number of factors that will affect ‘message processing’ (how the receiver thinks about the message). Consideration of the receiver’s central role in persuasion is still a relatively new concern. Early persuasion researchers, like Hovland and the Yale school concentrated on the source and message variables (Johnston, 1994:41), but the ability to analyse the receiver and their concerns is perhaps the most important persuasive skill, a skill which is underdeveloped in many would-be persuaders. As conservators we should consider very carefully if our failure to get the message across tells us more about our inability to understand others than their inability to understand us.

For a receiver to think through a persuasive message they need a combination of two circumstances: they must be able to understand a message presented to them, and they must want to understand it. For example, few persuaders will try to convince their managers in a memorandum entirely in Latin, yet examples of this simple rule being broken are widespread. In museums, for instance, it is not unusual for labels in display cases to be illegible and incomprehensible to most visitors (Davies, 1999 & Velarde, 1999). Conservators tend to communicate:

‘[in the] conventions of science...which many other museologists find incomprehensible. The result is that conservators are becoming increasingly isolated from their colleagues, when their mission, in fact, demands the most fluent communication.’ (Ward, 1989:viii)

Here Ward is describing how the conservator uses expert language in the belief that it adds to the power of their argument. Unfortunately it has the opposite effect as they have failed to consider the receiver's existing knowledge of, and interest in, the subject.

When thinking about the person, or people that you are trying to convince ask yourself questions about them. Can they understand the message that you are putting across? Do they have the ability and circumstances to do so? Are they motivated to listen and do they want to pay attention? Crucially ask yourself how much will they think about the matter in hand. If they have thought about the subject before where did they get to in their thinking, were they still seeking information or had they already made a decision? More fundamentally how do people think and learn: we know why Pavlov's dogs responded to a bell - can we manipulate museum managers as easily? How people think about themselves and the situations they find themselves in will also affect the decisions that they make and how they respond to messages.

Getting the Message Across

Having considered how people respond to messages, the messages themselves should be considered. Since Roman times advice on message construction has been developed and advocated, (Johnston, 1994:32). Studies have identified a range of message types that can be used in single message strategies or as part of ongoing persuasion campaigns (Seibold *et al*, 1994:544). Messages can be positive or reward-orientated, or they can be negative and threat-orientated. They can focus on the needs of the receiver or on the needs of the source. Long term persuasive engagements are different from one-off message exchanges because it is the sequence of messages rather than the content of a particular message that defines the encounter. Message strategies, types and content will have a different impact according to the circumstances and the amount of thinking that the person you are trying to persuade undertakes on the subject. A simple first lesson to remember about persuasion is that there is more than one way of putting across the same point. If you are not being successful in your current mode can you change the message, make it more positive, tailor it towards the needs of the receiver or introduce the issues little by little over time in order to improve your chances of success?

You - the Source of the Message

'That certain perceived characteristics of source exert a marked impact on the effectiveness of persuasive messages is one of the most well-documented and widely accepted generalisations of persuasion research' (Miller, 1987:464).

Source characteristics - what the persuader is like - are a vital element of the persuasion package. For example, a great deal of investment is made into booking pop stars to sponsor soft drinks, or manicuring the image of politicians. Conservators planning to persuade are unlikely to be using celebrities to transmit their messages, nor will they be employing 'spin doctors' to manipulate their image. Nonetheless awareness of how the characteristics of a source can effect the persuasive encounter should improve a persuader's ability to analyse the responses that they receive and by understanding them they can adapt their message, or image.

The status, credibility and personality of a persuader are all significant variables in the persuasion process. The impact that they have will always be governed by circumstances. Conservators may like to think that those around them are making decisions based on the quality of their arguments, sadly this is often not the case. An awareness of some of the other issues that might be taken into account will allow the conservator to analyse puzzling responses and give them the opportunity, if they choose it, to adapt their image or style, or to seek another person to become the source of their message.

SUMMARY

This paper has restated the concerns raised elsewhere about the communication skills of many conservators. It has attempted to address this problem as many conservators need to be influential in their communication in order to successfully carry out their daily collections care responsibilities. By reviewing the body of literature

available on the subject of communication and applying it to common experiences of conservators in museums, one strand in this vast subject, persuasion, has been identified as critical. I hope that this paper will encourage conservators to actively consider persuasion as a subject that can be analysed, understood, taught and learnt. Each of the characteristics of source, message and receiver could be discussed in much more detail. The real challenge however is to understand the role of each in different situations.

The Future

At the end of the twentieth century conservators have begun to question the success of their communication attempts. The development of new communication media is one of the distinctive features of the new century. New forms alone, however, cannot improve the quality of communication: they can only increase the quantity and speed of that communication. Therefore the use of computers, and the Internet will do nothing to improve communication if the background communication skills are not first grasped. If conservators in the twenty-first century want to be effective they must do more than develop their technical expertise and extend their studies into areas that are new for them, such as the art of persuasion.

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Editor please use this footnote:

The term museum is used in this paper to describe museums, galleries, stately homes and other establishments which hold collections for the public good.