

Persuading Aristotle

Peter Thompson, Allen & Unwin, 1998, 216 pages. Recommended retail price \$24.95. ISBN number 1-86448-739-9

This book is subtitled *The timeless art of persuasion in business, negotiation and the media*, and that is precisely what it sets out to teach the reader. An entertaining read over seven chapters and 216 pages, it offers an insight into persuasion and how to use it in real scenarios such as business presentations, media communications and negotiations.

The title reference to Aristotle is, of course, a homily to ancient Greece and the thinker's legacy to the world. "The fool tells me his reasons. The wise man persuades me with my own," he said.

The first two chapters are an historical account of the three great minds of ancient Greece - Aristotle, Socrates and Plato - and an explanation of how their work bears relevance today. Socrates (c.469-399BC) left no writings and was eventually condemned to death, accused of blasphemy and corrupting the morals of youth through heretical teachings (he declined to escape and committed suicide by drinking hemlock). His student, Plato (c.429-347BC) who later described him as "the wisest and justest and best of all men I have ever known", set up a school of learning and philosophy in Athens known as the Academy. Plato's most renowned student there was Aristotle. Aristotle stayed with Plato until Plato's death in 347BC then went off to Macedonia to tutor Alexander the Great. He later returned to Athens to found his own school and teach the art of persuasion.

Aristotle's contribution to history was *The Art of Rhetoric*, or *On Rhetoric*. Classical rhetoric was divided into five principles or parts, four of them identified by Aristotle and which remain the foundations of modern persuasion. Thompson names them as invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery. He then illustrates their use in building a logical, rational, persuasive and defensible argument by highlighting some of the actions of businessman John Bell, a friend and former Australian managing director of the Esprit clothing company.

Bell asked Thompson to help him communicate better. They worked together to sharpen Bell's skills, improve his knowledge, help him learn how to influence different personality styles and get through to different people, speak with *ethos* or character, put together persuasive arguments or *logos*, determine powerful body language and lead people to achieve a common goal.

"To get his message out, John began arranging a heavy schedule of talks and media appearances...his audiences were often sceptical. They would not be swayed by emotional appeals based on *pathos* alone. He worked hard to deliver his message in a framework of solid reasoning or *logos*, arguing his case step by step to its logical conclusion." The frameworks which Thompson and Bell worked on are contained in the book.

Thompson puts the theory of persuasion to the test with a series of presentations, advertisements and speeches. He uses a five-point plan of persuasion for all of them, the first example a theoretical prototype advertisement for coffee. The initial step is to devise the bait (sexy looking people wouldn't start the day without coffee), then outline the problem or question - what brand of

coffee would these people drink? You then find a solution, that the brand of coffee is sexy because of its taste, its reputation and its premium price, create the pay-off - you too will be sexier by drinking this coffee - and implement the call to action, which is of course to buy it.

Chapters 5 and 6 expand this short foray into real life persuasion and how to become an astute negotiator, taking readers step-by-step into the art of making successful business presentations. The advice comes think and fast: wear your client's shoes; think and organise; use persuasive language and style; use charts and speaker aids; non-verbal communication; persuasive body language; performance anxiety and warming up.

The final part of the book deals with media relations. It separates the media, advising how to prepare for a radio, television or newspaper interview and initiates readers into some of the workings of the media in question.

Much of the advice throughout the book is common sense but when the spotlight is turned on you, it is often this common sense which deserts your head. Its tone is on occasions simplistic but everyone has to start somewhere and this book isn't such a bad place to begin. There are some valuable lessons in the chapters on persuasion and negotiation, particularly when applied to real cases, and the idea that our modern negotiating skills hark back to ancient Greece is an interesting one. It certainly makes *Persuading Aristotle* eminently more readable than the usual self-help tome.

In summation, a book worth keeping as a handy reference tool for those days when the left side of your brain needs help. <

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