



How to Change Someone's Mind



By [Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries](#) , INSEAD

Powerful storytelling can awaken curiosity and challenge people to shift their outlook.

Once upon a time, the Persian king of all kings, Shahryār, beheaded his wife after discovering she was unfaithful. Overcome with rage, the monarch resolved to exact revenge on womankind by taking a new wife each night and beheading her the next morning.

After most of the eligible women in the kingdom had either fled or been killed, Scheherazade, the daughter of the king's advisor, devised a scheme to save herself and future victims. Scheherazade insisted on marrying the monarch, and on their first night together she told him a story, without revealing the ending.

The king permitted her to live another day to finish her tale, and so she continued with her cliffhangers for 1,001 nights. Eventually, Scheherazade's stories caused the king to have a change of heart, realise the injustices he

had wrought and cease his vengeful rampage. Scheherazade, the narrator of the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*, earned her place as one of the shrewdest heroines in world literature.

While this story was set in the Islamic Golden Age, Scheherazade could be considered a highly effective coach or psychotherapist today. Through storytelling techniques, she awakened the king's curiosity, challenged his behaviour and managed to change his outlook on life.

Scheherazade's form of psychological intervention can be applied to different situations. Many of us find ourselves in difficult circumstances that require influencing people and encouraging them to change. But altering the behaviour – or even the mind – of others can be extremely difficult. Through employing the Scheherazade method, we can help people identify the roadblocks and obstacles that stop them from living a [fulfilling life](#).

The Scheherazade method: Seven steps to change a person's mind

1. Don't impose your point of view

Resist the temptation to directly tell the person the path they need to take. Direct advice might backfire, causing the person to back off or resist.

Scheherazade realised that the king had deep and powerful defences – namely the conviction that his acts of vengeance were justified given the behaviour of his disloyal wife. To confront these beliefs head-on would only have reinforced them, making it much harder for him to be open to change.

2. Show empathy and help disentangle ambivalent feelings

Carefully listen to what the person says and try to see things from their point of view. By understanding the source of their worries and insecurities, you can help the person confront and overcome them.

Scheherazade broke down the king's defences by showing genuine compassion and demonstrating that she understood why he was acting in this particular manner, even if she didn't agree with it. She approached him without judgement and used her stories to redirect his hostile energy and consider different perspectives.

3. Sow a seed of doubt

Find relevant examples to get the person to doubt and reconsider their existing values and behaviour.

Through her stories, Scheherazade exposed the king to basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, anger, contempt, surprise, shame and guilt. She skilfully guided him to these revelations, camouflaging the central theme of forgiveness within her stories.

In doing so, she introduced doubt into the king's mind about his motivations and his actions.

4. Spell out the consequences

Observe the behavior of the person you're dealing with and demonstrate a clear link between actions and consequences.

Scheherazade was astute enough not to confront the king directly with his evil deeds. She sympathised with him, but, through the morality of each tale, she illustrated the disastrous outcomes for characters who behaved in a similarly cruel manner. Her stories helped him understand the link between immediate gratification and longer-term adverse consequences.

5. Harness the power of psychological judo

Avoid being argumentative. Instead, deal with the person in a gentle, seemingly inconspicuous manner.

Scheherazade was an expert in psychological judo, which is to move with, and not against, whatever needs dealing with in order to break down the other person's defences and influence the outcome. When a judoka gets their opponent off-balance, they have the chance to influence the next move

Psychological judo can be a highly effective way to gently nudge people – whether you want them to share their opinion, see another perspective or follow a different path.

6. Empower and support their transformation

Encourage the person to explore their own ideas and help them identify alternative behaviours or outlooks. Once they've identified how they want to change, support them in creating an action plan.

To facilitate the transformation process, Scheherazade emphasised self-efficacy – a person’s belief in their ability to complete a task or achieve a goal. This helped increase the king’s confidence in his ability to change.

7. Guide, but don’t enforce, the change

In a very respectful way, help the person weigh up the various options, and trust their ability to enact and manage any changes themselves.

Scheherazade did not tell the king directly what to do but steered him to self-awareness. She helped him take responsibility for his actions and ownership over finding a solution.

Even if you don’t intend to change someone, you can encourage them to deeply examine their values, priorities, interests, feelings, moods, wishes, dreams, fears and apprehensions.

Words and stories hold more power than we realise. After all, if Scheherazade could change the heart of a mass murderer, it shouldn’t be that difficult to change someone’s mind!

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