

AUDIENCE-DIRECTED COMMUNICATION

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AUDIENCE-CENTERED MESSAGES*

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The process of rhetorical communication must take into account the nature of the people for whom the message is being created. People are not all alike; they are all individuals. When they gather together into audiences, they do not give up their individualities. The differences in people that most concern speakers are peoples' attitudes and beliefs. It is impossible for the speaker or message source to perceive all of an individual's attitudes and beliefs, much less to perceive those of all of the members of a collective audience. It is necessary, however, for the speaker, or as we call him here, the source, to analyze his audience and estimate the attitudes and beliefs of these people in order to construct his message appropriately. Our present concern, consequently, is with what attitudes and beliefs are, how they are formed, why they persist, and how a source may induce them to change.

Attitudes and Beliefs Defined

An attitude is an individual's predisposition to behave in a particular way in response to given stimuli within his world. An attitude always has a frame of reference, or focus. The focus may be a person, a group, a policy, a product, or something else. We have attitudes toward almost everything within our world. At a given moment if we perceive something new, we tend to form an attitude toward it. We may conclude from this definition of attitude

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that a person's attitude may be inferred by observing his behavior. To an extent this is true. If a person joins an antiwar organization, vocally supports antiwar candidates for political office, donates money to antiwar campaigns, and refuses to enter the military service, it is reasonable to infer that he is indeed antiwar. On the other hand, if the individual supports militaristic political candidates, gives speeches recommending military action against another country, and volunteers for military service, we may reasonably presume that he holds militaristic attitudes.

But appearances may be deceiving. Often a person may hold a given attitude but behave in a manner that apparently contradicts that attitude. He may, for instance, subscribe to the attitude that smoking is hazardous to health, but may continue smoking two packs of cigarettes a day. In short, sometimes people behave in ways that are inconsistent with some of their attitudes.

Several interesting research studies of this type of behavior have been conducted. For example in the early 1930's a Frenchman traveled around the United States with a Chinese friend. He stopped at over two hundred and fifty restaurants, hotels, and other public places. In only one case was this party of mixed racial extraction refused service because of race. But when the same people who had provided service for this racially mixed party were asked, they were surveyed a short time later, whether they would serve Chinese in their establishments, ninety-two per cent of these people indicated that they would not. While this study was conducted forty years ago, and much has changed in the United States since that time, this is an excellent example of where overt behavior and expressed

attitude were diametrically opposed to one another. There have been many other studies on other attitudes and behaviors which have produced similar types of results. It would be easy to conclude from these studies that attitude and behavior are really unrelated. However, this inconsistency between attitude and behavior is far more apparent than real. The primary problem when attempting to infer attitude from behavior is to determine what particular attitude to be concerned with. Very few behavioral choices are based on a single attitude. We all have literally thousands of attitudes. They tend to become grouped in attitude-clusters. These clusters are composed of attitudes that are relevant to one another and that usually are consistent with one another. When they are not all consistent with one another, however, any behavior relevant to the attitude-cluster will appear to be inconsistent with one or more attitudes. For example, in the case of the racially mixed party traveling across the United States, it is quite possible that the prejudicial attitude toward the Chinese was present in most of the restaurant managers and hotel keepers. But other attitudes, such as a negative attitude toward any kind of a disturbance in their place of business or an attitude that made them not to want to appear like bigots, could be considered very consistent with the behavior in which they engaged. Thus no matter how much the individual might have tried to keep his behavior consistent with his attitude, whatever behavioral choice he made, he would have had to be inconsistent with one attitude or another.

All of us find ourselves in similar circumstances from time

to time. For example, most of us have a generally favorable attitude toward receiving money without exerting much effort but we also have a generally unfavorable attitude toward stealing. Thus, when we refrain from pocketing money that we observe on a counter in a store, our behavior is consistent with one of our attitudes, but inconsistent with another. If, however, someone offers us a fairly large amount of money merely to give a short talk, we're quite likely to accept the invitation. The negative attitude toward stealing is not a dominant part of the attitude-cluster relevant to this behavior; so it does not prevent our behaving consistently with our favorable attitude toward obtaining money without exerting much effort.

There is, then, an hierarchy of attitudes which functions in determining which attitudes shall lead to behavior and which attitudes shall not, in given cases. Each attitude-cluster forms within such an hierarchy. An observed item of behavior by an individual will usually give us a clue to the structure of the attitude-cluster, but will not necessarily provide sufficient information to infer the character of all of the attitudes within that cluster. The crucial point to remember is: behavior is always consistent with one or more attitudes, but that what particular attitudes these are are not always immediately apparent.

Closely related to attitude is "opinion," which generally is considered to be the verbal expression of attitude. Opinion is an item of behavior that normally may be predicted from an attitude. If we hold a particular attitude, it is expected that when an appropriate occasion arises, we shall express an opinion consistent

with that attitude. It is dangerous, however, to infer attitude directly from opinion. Many circumstances arise to cause a person to express an opinion inconsistent with his attitudes. If the boss asks his employee what he thinks of the boss's pet project, the employee is likely to express a favorable opinion even if he considers the project a useless waste of time. He wants to keep his job and keep in good stead with the boss. When statements are made that do not reflect attitudes, we frequently refer to such expressions as "lip service." We pay lip service to many things we do not entirely accept. Generally, however, opinions do reflect attitudes. More than that, they tend to reinforce attitudes. If we once publicly commit ourselves by our expressed opinions to a certain attitude, it is more likely that we shall retain that attitude.

With this general introduction to the concept of attitude in mind, let us consider the nature of attitudes in more detail. Attitudes have three essential characteristics--direction, intensity, and salience.

The direction of an attitude may be favorable, unfavorable, or neutral (in no direction). On most questions, we can find people with attitudes representing each of these directions. For example, on the question of increased trade with Communist China, there are people who favor such a policy and people who oppose it and people who are neutral toward it. An audience may be composed of all favorables, mostly favorables, all unfavorables, mostly unfavorables, all neutrals, mostly neutrals, or any imaginable

combination of favorables, unfavorables, and neutrals. It is vitally important that a source perceive the prevailing direction of the audience's attitudes. Messages appropriate for one audience with one prevailing attitude are likely to provide opposite effects in other audiences.

The strength of an attitude is referred to as its intensity. Any attitude may be held with great intensity or with intensity lessening downward to almost none. The intensity characteristic should be thought of as a continuum ranging from zero to infinity. Various people holding attitudes in the same direction may differ greatly as to the intensity of that attitude. In general, the more intensely an attitude is held, the more likely it is to produce behavior consistent with itself.

The perceived importance of the focus of an attitude is what we mean by the term salience. A young man and a young woman may have similar attitudes, as to direction and intensity, towards serving in the military. But the attitude is probably much more salient with a man than it is with the young woman, because he is much more likely to become a member of the military than is the young woman. Highly salient attitudes tend to be strongly held and difficult to change.

Neutral attitudes present a special problem. Research indicates that there are at least three kinds of neutral attitudes, corresponding to three kinds of people--the ignorant neutral, the unconcerned neutral, and the intense neutral. All of us fall into each of these categories for some attitudes. The ignorant neutral is the person who lacks information or experience with a particular attitude focus

so that no real attitude has ever been formed. Many of us, for example, are ignorant neutrals on the question of who should be authorized to govern Cyprus. We know little or nothing about the area and even less about the governmental conditions. Those of us who do not live on Okinawa may be unconcerned neutrals on the question of who should govern that area and whether or not American Military bases should be retained there. We may have read about all of the difficulties, but since it does not directly concern us, we may choose not to take sides on the question. Finally, some of us are intense neutrals on the question of who should be elected to a given office during a given election contest. While the election may be directly important to us, and we may know a good deal about the candidates for the office, we may be unable to make up our minds about whom to support. We may, indeed, dislike both candidates and so refuse to support either one. The "stay-at-home vote" in most elections may really be composed of intense neutrals.

Beliefs and attitudes are very similar to one another in most respects, but they differ in one major way. Whereas an attitude is an evaluation of an attitude focus, a belief is the degree of probable truth that we assign to a focus. An attitude is more of a "feeling" response, whereas a belief is more of a "thinking" response.

To help to clarify this distinction let us take the statement, "young people are poor drivers." Some people would consider the statement absolutely true, others would consider it absolutely false, and most people would fall somewhere along the continuum between truth and falsity in their belief. The use of such a

statement as, "young people are poor drivers," infers but does not state an evaluation of young people. In this sense, while it is an expression of belief, it is not an expression of attitude. The statement, "I don't like young people," is an example of an attitude statement. There is no question here of probable truth, merely one of evaluation.

Like attitudes, beliefs have the dimensions of direction, intensity, and salience. A belief's dimension of direction is a continuum ranging between complete belief and complete disbelief. Intensity of belief may better be identified as certainty of belief. Degrees of certainty range from very uncertain to very certain. Salience of belief is almost exactly equivalent of salience of attitude. How relevant is the belief to the individual holding it?

In order to avoid excessive redundancy in wording, for the remainder of this paper we will use the term attitude to refer to both attitudes and beliefs. But you should keep clearly in mind the distinction that we have made above. Later this distinction will become very important.

Formation of Attitudes

All attitudes are the products of the totality of the individual's experiences with the focuses of the attitudes. People with essentially similar experiences with given focus will tend to have similar attitudes toward it. For example, if two people purchase the same brand of car and have the same type of problems with the car, they are likely to develop very similar attitudes toward that type of car.

Attitudes, then, are learned. We are not born with attitudes, but begin to form them almost immediately after we are born. Our mothers feed us. We find this pleasant. Consequently we develop favorable attitudes toward our mothers. This is representative of most of our learning throughout our lives. We learn to respond to stimuli in our perceptual world. Responses that we find acceptable or rewarding tend to become habitual. Those we find unacceptable or unrewarding tend not to be repeated.

Let us take as an example the formation of an attitude that most of us hold--our attitude toward telling the truth. From early childhood, we are encouraged to tell the truth. We are told that telling the truth is good, right, and so on. All of this is designed to persuade us to tell the truth by instilling in our minds strongly favorable attitude toward truth-telling. If we tell the truth, and are commended for it, our attitude is reinforced. If we tell a lie, and are punished for it, our attitude for truth-telling is likewise reinforced. If, however, we tell a lie, and avoid punishment or are rewarded, we are likely to develop a favorable attitude toward telling lie, and avoid punishment or are rewarded, we are likely to develop a favorable attitude toward telling lies. Our favorable attitude toward telling the truth in such a case would be weakened. Similarly, if we are punished for telling the truth, we tend to develop a more favorable attitude toward telling lies.

Nto all attitudes, of course, are formed by such direct reinforcement. We have a remarkable capacity to generalize in our learning. If we experience several similar stimuli, we generalize to other, similar stimuli and respond to all of them in much the

same way. For example, if as children we are reprimanded by a police officer, we may become nervous and apprehensive in the presence of policemen for the rest of our lives. Generalization also functions in the formation of attitudes. In our preceding example of the policeman, the person reprimanded will probably develop an unfavorable attitude toward that particular policeman. In addition, he will tend to extend the attitude to other policemen with whom he comes in contact. He may even generalize the attitude to any person wearing a uniform. In short, people can shift the attitude focus while maintaining the same attitude. In the case of the policeman, the attitude shifted from a individual to a group. Attitudes, then, are learned responses. They are based on the totality of experiences with a given attitude focus. Experiences we have with an attitude focus are frequently experienced with another person or a group of people. We are all members of society as a whole; but, more importantly, we are members of many groups. These groups range from very small (the family) to the very large (political party or religious denomination). Our attitudes are not independent of the attitudes held by the groups of which we are members. Attitudes of others tend to "rub off" on us. In this way, we vastly expand our universe of attitudes and at the same time stabilize and strengthen it.

Since attitudes are learned responses based upon all our experiences, direct or vicarious, with an attitude focus, we may expect that the amount of information that an individual possesses regarding an attitude focus will to some degree determine the nature of the individual's attitudes. To a limited extent this is true. The

amount of information possessed by an individual may affect the intensity of his attitude, but it normally does not affect the direction of the attitude. Well-informed people tend to have more intense attitudes than those less well-informed. Researchers have been unable, however, to find a relationship between the amount of information an individual possesses and whether or not he favors or does not favor a given attitude focus.

The Stability of Attitudes

Some attitudes remain stable over long periods of time. These attitudes persist because they are reinforced within the environment in which the person holding them exists. Probably their friends hold similar attitudes, and showing a change in attitude would often cause an individual to be ostracized. Thus, reinforcement is a factor in producing stability of attitudes as well as in their formation. Four other factors are at least as important in causing attitudes to remain stable. These factors are selective exposure, selective attention, selective perception, and selective recall.

Selective Exposure. The most important factor in the persistence of attitudes is selective exposure to communicative stimuli. Selective exposure is the tendency of people to seek out communicative stimuli they think will be consistent with their attitudes, and to avoid communicative stimuli which they believe will be inconsistent with their attitudes. We may see this process in operation in our own everyday experience. We subscribe to and read newspapers and magazines that have editorial policies consistent with our attitudes. We form friendships with people who have attitudes similar to our. We join organizations with views with which we agree. All of these

actions are designed (usually unconsciously) to place us in situations where communicative stimuli will be consistent with our attitudes, or to avoid getting us into situations where communicative stimuli will be in conflict with our attitudes.

Selective Attention. People cannot always avoid being exposed to communicative stimuli inconsistent with their attitudes. When people do come into contact with such stimuli, the process of selective attention is often applied. In a sense, of course, all attention is selective. Everything in our perceptual world makes demands on our attention. We cannot attend to everything at once. When we are exposed to a message, we attend to some parts of it more intently than others. Thus, we are selecting what we shall attend to most closely. This selection is generally an unconscious process. As a result, we tend to pay closest attention to messages consistent with our attitudes and pay less attention to messages or parts of messages that are inconsistent with our attitude. Consequently, we avoid full exposure to stimuli that might otherwise change our attitude.

Selective Perception. Frequently, we are unable to completely ignore stimuli in messages that are inconsistent with our attitudes. When this happens we may unconsciously distort the message so as to perceive it to be consistent with our attitudes. This is the process of selective perception. We may listen to a source expressing a militaristic view but perceive his position as being nonmilitaristic if that would be consistent with our attitudes. If the message is such that this is impossible, we may perceive the source to be

dishonest, uninformed, or otherwise not credible, and simply disregard the message entirely. We tend, then, to perceive what we want to perceive, and what we want to perceive is something consistent with our attitudes. Thus, people frequently distort messages so as to perceive the stimuli as reinforcers of their own attitudes.

Selective Recall. If a person is unable to avoid being exposed to messages, inconsistent with his attitudes, and he is unable to avoid paying attention to the messages, is unable to distort the messages so as to perceive the stimuli as consistent with his attitudes, a fourth response may be chosen. This response is selective recall, the tendency of people to remember messages consistent with their attitudes and to forget inconsistent messages. For example, if we are antimilitarist and are exposed to messages that include information on both sides of the issue, we tend to recall the antimilitarist information and to forget the promilitarist information.

With all of these factors in operation, it is no wonder that attitudes tend to be stable and persist over time. The wonder is that attitudes do get changed under some circumstances. Therefore, let us consider how attitudes are changed.

Attitude Consistency and Change

In recent years, several theories of attitude change have been developed. These are frequently referred to as "tension-reduction" or "homeostatic" theories. All of these theories have a common basis. This has been called the "principle of consistency." This principle suggests that the human mind has a powerful need for

consistency in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Thus, if two or more of these parts are inconsistent with one another, change in attitude occurs as a result of the mind's efforts to establish consistency.

Although the principle of consistency may be applied to any pair, or group, of attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors, we will explain this principle with reference to two particular types of attitudes--attitude toward the source of the message and attitude toward the concept discussed in the message.

In any communication transaction there is a source, a receiver, and a topic of discussion. The receiver holds an initial attitude toward the source, and an initial attitude toward the topic. In addition, the source through his message expresses his attitude toward the topic. These two attitudes of the receiver and the attitude of the source may be consistent or may be inconsistent. Figure 1 gives the possible cases where the attitudes are in a consistent relationship. Figure 2 indicates conditions where the attitudes are in an inconsistent relationship. Briefly put, receivers expect that sources that they like will like topics that they like, and that sources they dislike will dislike topics that they dislike. The reverse also holds true, they expect the sources that they like will dislike topics that they dislike and that the sources that they dislike will like topics that they dislike. For example, if the receiver is in favor of higher taxes and the source whom the receiver respects speaks in favor of higher taxes, we have a consistent relationship among the attitudes. If, however, the receiver is opposed to a tax increase, likes the source, but the

source speaks in favor of a tax increase, an inconsistent relationship exists among the attitudes. The principle of consistency holds that whenever an inconsistent relationship exists, attitude change will occur. Of course, the source's attitude is not subject to change in our examples above, so the receiver must choose to change his attitude toward the source, toward the topic, or toward both.

This principle of consistency is one of the central principles in communication theory. Literally hundreds of research studies have been conducted which support the principle of consistency. In short, if a source wishes to change a receiver's attitude, he must create inconsistency among the receiver's attitudes. If this is not done, there will be no attitude change. But even if it is done, the receiver will not necessarily change the attitude which the source wants him to change. The possibility always exists that the receiver will merely change his attitude toward the source and not change his attitude at all on the topic of the message.

In order to understand what the source needs to do in order to enhance the probability of producing the attitude change on the topic he desires, we need to consider the concept of message discrepancy. A source's message is discrepant when he states a position about the topic that is different from the position held by the receiver. The greater the difference between the source's position as expressed in the message and the receiver's position, the greater the message discrepancy. If the receiver perceives the message of the source to be exactly the same as his own position, there is no attitude change. Consequently, it is essential that

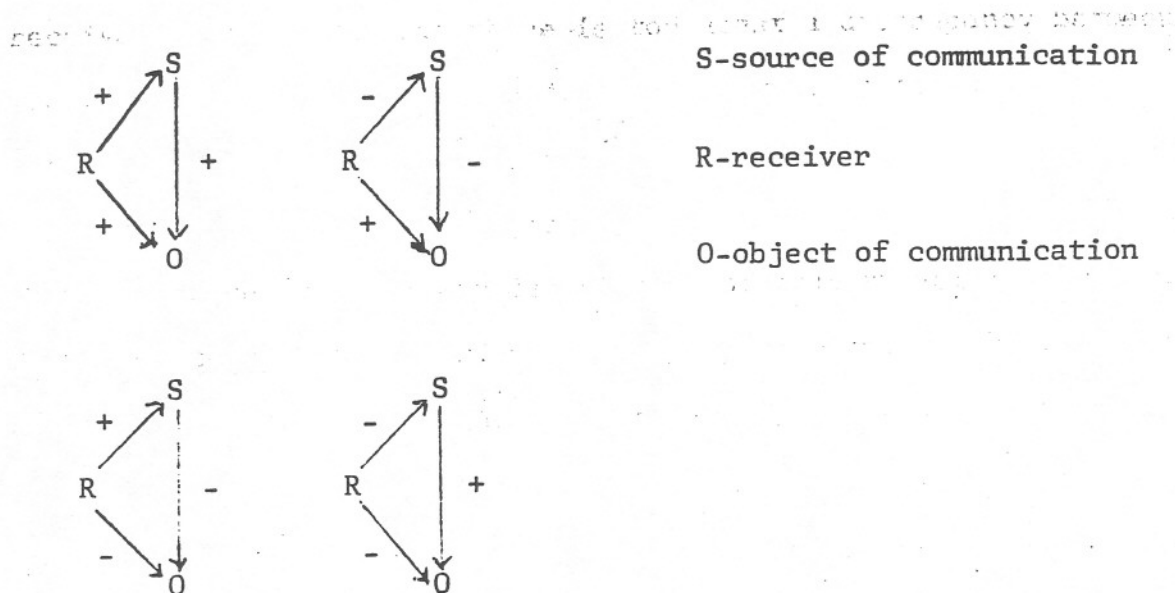


Figure 1. Consistent Relationships

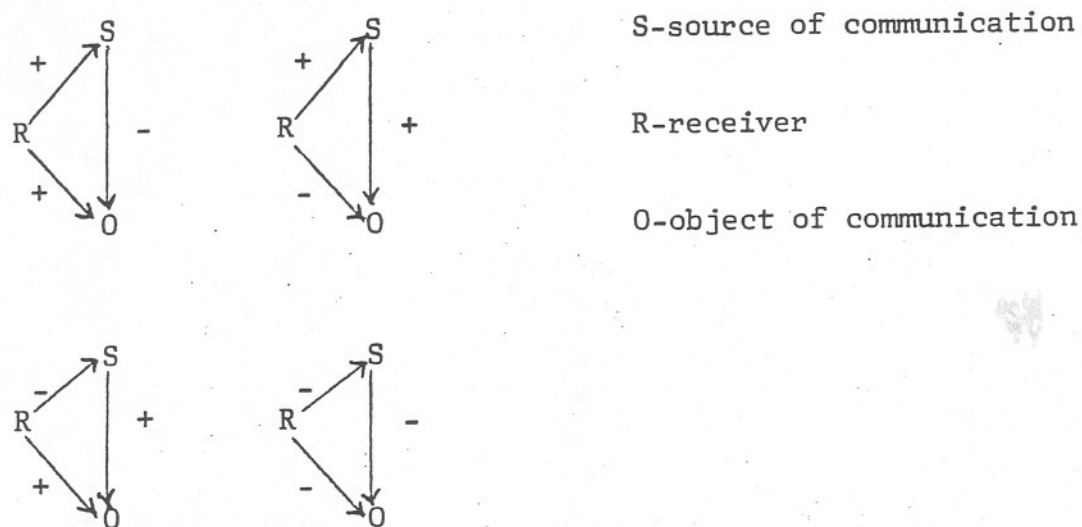


Figure 2. Inconsistent Relationships

the source induce the receiver to perceive that there is some discrepancy between his position and the source's. Herein enters a serious problem in communication. If the source causes the

receiver to perceive that there is too great a discrepancy between their attitudes, he may instead of changing his attitude on the topic, change his attitude toward the source. There is, therefore, an optimal level of message discrepancy that needs to be generated. Figure 3 presents a graphic description of that to which we refer. As can be seen in this figure, as message discrepancy increases up to a given point attitude change also increases. But as discrepancy increases beyond that point, attitude change decreases and, if the discrepancy level becomes too high, the receiver may actually change his attitude in the direction opposite of that desired by the source. This has been referred to as the "boomerang effect." At this point, it is important that message discrepancy must be controlled in order to have desired communicative effects on receivers.

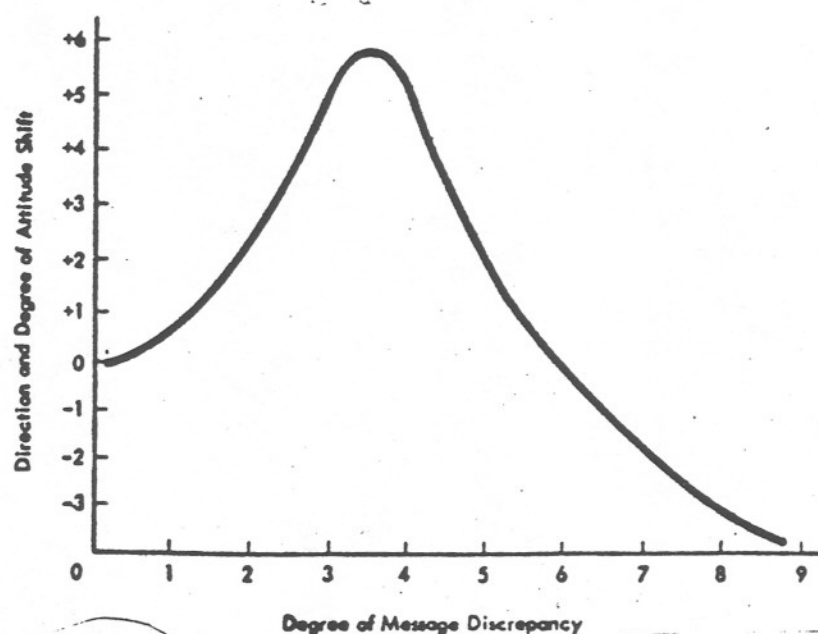


Figure 3. The effects of message discrepancy on attitude change. Numbers were arbitrarily selected to illustrate the relationship between attitude change and message discrepancy and are not meaningful in themselves.

Retention of Attitude Change

Although attitudes are self-reinforcing, and have a tendency to persist, they can be changed. While it may appear from the foregoing discussion that changing attitudes is very difficult, this is not necessarily always true. Obtaining the maximum change of attitude possible in a given case is a difficult process, and it requires considerable skill on the part of the source well versed in the art of rhetorical communication. Obtaining only a degree of change, on the other hand, is usually quite easy. As an experienced communication researcher once commented, "all you have to do is drop a pebble on the street, and you will change someone's attitude."

Some communication is designed to obtain immediate effects. Frequently, however, the action we desire an individual to take will occur days or weeks after the communicative transaction in which we engaged. To produce immediate change of attitude in these cases is not enough, the attitude must stay changed. The question of retention of change, then, is a crucial one for rhetorical communication.

Research indicates that the length of time an attitude change is retained varies from a few minutes to many weeks. Some changes, of course, are permanent. Very little is known about the factors affecting retention. Much research is still needed in this area. But from the limited research already done on retention of attitude change, we are able to extract a few relevant factors.

The main factor seems to be whether or not the receiver is aware that he has a new attitude. That is, if he knows his

attitude has changed, it is more likely to remain changed. If we are unaware of changes that have occurred, we may continue to function habitually with our old attitude. This may enhance the functioning of selective recall and selective exposure. Our old attitude has been disturbed, and we may either seek out a new message to reinforce it, or simply forget the message that induced the immediate change.

A second factor that seems to be related to the retention of attitude change is the vividness of the original message that produced the change. If the message is memorable, we tend to reinforce the change that was made by recalling the message from time to time. That is, a vivid and memorable message will interfere with the natural process of selective recall. By making important points in his message memorable, the source will select what his audience will recall.

As we indicated earlier, salient attitudes tend to be held more intensely and are more subject to change than nonsalient attitudes. This suggests that if the source constructs his message in such a manner as to make the receiver perceive his new attitude as highly salient, that new attitude will be likely to persist. Salience is closely related to perceived self-interest. Thus, if the new attitude is perceived to be important to the receiver's self-interest, he is more likely to retain that attitude.

In general, research has indicated that the greater the immediate change of attitude, the greater will be the change that is retained over a period of time. This is not to suggest that major shifts in attitude are more persistent than minor shifts. Rather, it just simply takes longer for a ten point shift, for example, to

decline to zero than it does for a five point shift to do so. Thus, the source who is seeking long-term change of attitude should strive to achieve as large an immediate attitude change as may be feasible.

Finally, the source may enhance his long-term effect on his receiver's attitude by inoculating him against persuasion. It is not uncommon for a receiver to be exposed to sources who take positions contrary to one another. The effect of the first source can, therefore, be overcome by the effects of the second source. There are methods that can be employed which will tend to make the second source's message less effective. This process is referred to as "inoculation." We will consider this further in a later chapter.

To summarize, the source who wishes to influence the attitudes of his receiver over an extended period of time must consciously develop his message with this in mind. Just because an attitude is changed today, does not mean that it will stay changed through tomorrow.