

*A Free Guide*

# HOW TO BECOME A BETTER PERSUADER

Six lessons in building trust, bridging  
division, and changing minds

By Anand Giridharadas

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# **With our communities so divided, it can feel impossible to talk about things, let alone change anyone's mind. But it can be done. Here's how.**

Persuasion is the art of changing minds, of bringing people in to your vision of how things should be. But these days, persuasion seems pretty impossible.

It can feel overwhelming to have conversations with your climate-change-denying uncle, your conspiracy theorist neighbor, or your colleague who sounds more and more fascism-curious. So much so that you have gone the route of “agree to disagree” and have written them off as people no longer worth bothering with.

But here's the thing: When we give up on changing minds, we give up on changing things. And we open the door to how group decisions used to be made before democracy became a thing: tyranny and violence.

Like you, perhaps, I got tired of despair in recent years, tired of watching us all go down this terrible road. So I spent time learning from people who show a better way — who have developed the skills of building trust and relationship and of persuading even in this moment when it feels so hard. This is a guide to that art.

The lessons below will help you practice being a better persuader within your own families, friend groups, and communities. Leaning into these conversations may be uncomfortable. No doubt about that. But democracy isn't supposed to be easy. And it's far better than the alternatives we see around us.

Trust me: Learning to be a better persuader is more productive and rewarding than shaking your fist at the internet or waiting for a criminal investigation to pan out.

Inspired by my book *THE PERSUADERS* and the lessons I've learned from the people I studied for it — activists, educators, scientists, and, especially, organizers — here are six ways to open a door to more effective conversations for change with real people you care about and interact with in your communities.

When fighting for justice and change, how do you bring others along—those who are not there yet, and those who are actively complicit?



# 1. **DO:** Recognize that people who disagree with you are complicated, too.

## **DON'T:** Treat them as immovable monoliths.

When the stakes are as high as they are today, it's easy to dismiss those on the other side of the divide as fanatically committed to their agenda. But research shows that a lot more people than we assume are conflicted about their views — or “contradicted,” as Beyoncé says. They hold strong opinions, lightly.

They may take a harsh stance on a “strong border,” but they also see themselves as champions of the underdog.

They might love Donald Trump — but recoil at powerful people scamming the powerless for profit.

These other, half-buried thoughts and feelings are your opening to a more productive conversation with that uncle or colleague you disagree with. Rather than lead with your own views, try to play into and rile up that submerged part of them that feels another way.

Don't try to replace what is in other people's heads. Simply try to displace it.

### **Persuader Spotlight**

As Steve Deline, a longtime organizer on LGBT rights, tells me in my chapter on so-called “deep canvassing”:

“My discovery in doing this work was that most people are 60-40 around most things. If we ask them to plant their flag on one side or the other, if we approach them that way, they're going to do so, because that's what makes us feel like rational, thinking humans — having an answer to a tough question. But if we approach people with the idea that it's normal to have complicated feelings, even if they have a Trump sign on their front yard, even if their public face expresses one thing — if we approach them with the assumption of, ‘There's something more going on underneath,’ oftentimes we find out that there is.”

### **Go Deeper**

Watch [this video of a deep canvasser patiently talking a citizen through her prejudiced but also ultimately complicated sentiments about her own niece.](#)

**2. DO:** Call people *in* to the future you want.

**DON'T:** Call people *out* for not getting it yet.

If you believe in democracy and progress and building a bigger, more colorful “we,” it’s essential to make space among the “woke” for the still-waking.

One of the great ironies of our time is that the movements most devoted to a narrow and exclusionary vision for the future have managed to come off to millions of people as inclusive and inviting and come-as-you-are. Whereas some of the most inclusive and just movements come across as standoffish and purist and quick to issue tests you must pass to prove that you get it.

Instead, create on-ramps to the highway to progress. Don’t call people out for getting terms wrong. Don’t ignore it, either. Invite them in and allow them to show up as they are, and then educate with patience and love — and strategy.

### **Persuader Spotlight**

Less calling out and more calling in, which, as Loretta Ross, a reproductive and racial justice activist whom I profile in the book, defines as a “call out done with love.” The revolution will not be shitposted.

### **Go Deeper**

For more information and tools on creating change through “calling in,” sign up for Loretta’s [newsletter](#) and check out one of [her online courses](#), such as “[Calling In: Creating Change Without Cancel Culture](#).”

### 3. **DO:** Amplify what you're for, and help people see it.

**DON'T:** Live in perpetual reaction mode to the other side's outrages.

Look, there are a lot of outrages these days. And if you own a phone and have social media accounts, you could make a full-time job of lurching from angry reaction to angry reaction. *That TV host said what about immigrants? He put those confidential documents where?* Unwittingly, you end up living and thinking and talking on the other side's turf. You're engaging with their ideas, their frames, and their issues. As a result, you're staying mum about the world you want.

Next time you find yourself rage scrolling, take a deep breath, refrain from reposting, and thus amplifying, every outrageous thing from the other side. Instead, say what you're for.

Talk to your neighbors and relatives about what their daily life would be like with universal healthcare or a sustainable energy system or real reproductive freedom.

Talk relentlessly, joyfully about the kind of world you want. Your enthusiasm for that vision will be infectious.

#### **Persuader Spotlight**

"Say what you're for" is inspired by the communications guru Anat Shenker-Osorio, the subject of my chapter "The Art of Messaging."

"Paint the beautiful tomorrow" is another of her many mantras — which is to say, having said what you're for, help people visualize it in vivid, inviting terms.

#### **Go Deeper**

Read [one of the messaging guides](#) that Anat has informed. And [watch the "Breathe" ad](#) on which she collaborated with colleagues, a remarkable example of taking a terrible crisis (police violence toward Black citizens) and inverting it into a positive vision.

## 4. **DO:** Play the long game of trust building.

**DON'T:** Try to change a mind in a day.

The best persuaders have an elongated sense of time. They view the changing of minds as something that usually happens once certain other conditions have been met — conditions that may take time to achieve. Above all, it takes a considerable amount of trust building for many people to be able to process that they have been thinking about something the wrong way and should rethink it.

So don't try to flip your climate-denier aunt or your Elon Musk-loving colleague in a day.

Lay a bedrock of shared values and good faith with them. And slowly build on it. You'll reach a point where you can challenge what they think without triggering a sense of endangerment and an allergic reaction.

### **Persuader Spotlight**

Alicia Garza, a leading organizer in the Black Lives Matter movement, told me about her early organizing experiences in the Bay Area and learning the hard way that you have to come back again and again before people will trust you, and trust themselves, enough to think out loud and maybe change their mind.

### **Go Deeper**

Read Alicia's powerful and reflective memoir, *The Purpose of Power*, in which she shares many of the formative, small-scale organizing experiences that led to her success in shaping one of the most powerful social movements in history.

## 5. **DO:** Distinguish disinformation's victims from its powerful perpetrators.

**DON'T:** Make the duped and manipulated feel stupid.

How easy is it to be exasperated by the family members with otherwise good hearts who have succumbed to absurd online fantasies and the otherwise level-headed colleagues who endanger you because they believe vaccines are a secret plot to reprogram the human race? Very easy.

And yet the disinformation and manipulation and cult experts I spoke to for THE PERSUADERS opened my eyes to the hypocrisy many of us engage in when we condemn and sneer at these friends, relatives, neighbors, and colleagues.

We know that incredibly powerful people — and highly educated politicians who know better but never miss an opportunity — are spewing manipulative information into the ether. Yet we tend to condemn those in our midst who fall prey to the con artists because they are the ones we can reach.

Contempt doesn't work. But here is what the experts say does: No one wants to be a pawn in someone's twisted game. Rather than lead with an approach that makes disinformation victims feel dumb for falling for it, speak to their desire not to be someone's puppet. Use examples from other situations to illustrate how powerful actors use common tactics of manipulation to profit from the false beliefs of the powerless. Then point out how the same tactics may be at work in beliefs they have taken up. Lead with empathy and create a safe space for them to process without judgment.

### **Persuader Spotlight**

As John Cook, a cognitive scientist, told me: "The general avenue of approach I take is that people have been misled. That if you've been exposed to this misinformation, you're a victim more than a malicious actor." Mustering the discipline, even when you don't feel like it, to conceive of disinformation's dupes in that way opens the door to a much more effective approach. The approach most of us take tends to make these dupes feel belittled and stupid, which makes them dig in harder. But there is a better way, Cook argues.

### **Go Deeper**

Learn more about Cook's "[Cranky Uncle](#)" project, in which he shares readily applicable tips for talking to the disinformation victims in your life with patience, empathy — and effectiveness. 7.



## 6. **DO:** Get offline and get doing. Organize. Canvass. Associate!

### **DON'T:** Give in to hopelessness.

Enough with the despair. We've all been there for much of these last many years, and it's time to switch gears. We're not going to build the just and inclusive communities we wish to live in by being morally outraged all the time, warning and complaining, deploring, and praying for our political adversaries to be jailed. We have to actively fight for it by building a bigger, better, fiercer, more loving, more magnanimous and joyous and fiery movement — a new freedom movement.

This isn't the familiar plea to go vote — by all means, vote. But, also, do more than that.

Reallocate your TV-watching and tweeting time to organizing.

Find projects in your community that allow you to build bridges in real life.

Get trained in deep canvassing and go door to door, moving hearts and minds on issues you care about.

Refuse to give up on the people in your life that you have real relationships with and create change from within your own circles.

Become a proud persuader.

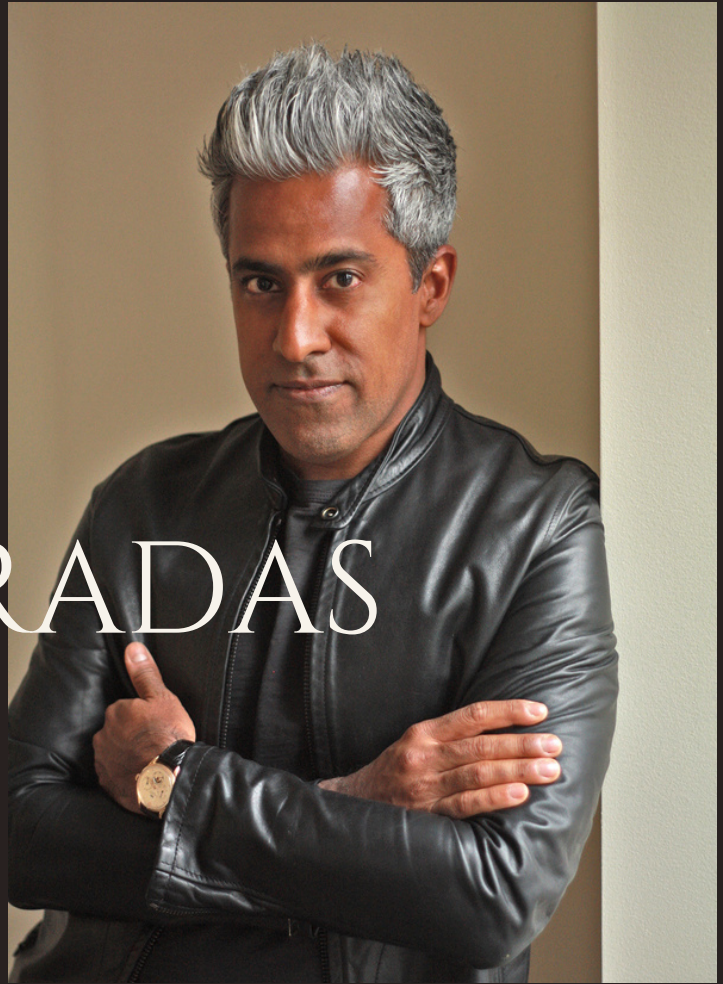
#### **Persuader Spotlight**

The lessons I've learned from the persuaders I've interviewed are endlessly inspiring and more than a downloadable resource can provide. Check out [THE PERSUADERS](#) at your favorite bookseller to keep the momentum going.

#### **Go Deeper**

Train to become a [deep canvasser](#). And get out there and persuade!

# ANAND GIRIDHARADAS



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He is an on-air political analyst for MSNBC. He has received the Radcliffe Fellowship, the Porchlight Business Book of the Year Award, Harvard University's Outstanding Lifetime Achievement Award for Humanism in Culture, and the New York Public Library's Helen Bernstein Book Award for Excellence in Journalism.

He lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife, Priya Parker, and their two children.



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