

Wuhan Labs, Antitrust, Unrest in France, and Catalysts – What Happens Next – 8.1.2021

Jonah Berger QA

Larry Bernstein:

Jonah, thank you so much for that. In your book, you give the example of the hostage negotiator, where you try to persuade someone to come up with their hands up, even though that means they're going to get arrested and not get the objectives they want. What did you learn from the hostage negotiator, someone who doesn't even know the person, probably in his worst possible state of his life? How do you change that person's mind to do what he doesn't want to do?

Jonah Berger:

Yeah. It was really interesting talking to hostage negotiators. I agree with much of what you said, but I don't agree with all of that. Actually, what the great negotiators do is they learn as much as possible about the person they're trying to change. Novice negotiators, they try to start with influence. They bang in there and they go, "Hey, come out with your hands up." Do this, or else. They start with influence. But that doesn't work. All it does is encourages people to hold up, to get more scared, to become more aggressive and do all the things that they don't want them to do.

And so what accomplished, successful, seasoned negotiators do is they start with something very different. I talked to one guy, and he was Greg Becky. And he always starts by saying, "Hey, tell me more about you." "Hey, I'm Greg. Are you doing okay? Are you doing okay? Do you have everything you need?" Starts by saying, let me build a bridge. Let me find out who this person is. Let me find out what this person needs and show them that I care about them. Starting by building social connections saying, "Hey, I'm Greg, are you okay?" Then using that to build a relationship.

Don't start by asking what you want to have happen, because then it seems like it's all about you. Start with them. Start with them and start with understanding. Start by showing that you care. Start by asking questions to understand why they're there and what the problem is. And only once we've gotten to that point, only once we understand them, can we move around so that we get them to do what we want them to do in the first place.

He tells this great story where he's talking to a guy who wants to commit suicide. And this is a little bit of a dark story, but it has a positive ending, so apologies. He talked to someone who's thinking about committing suicide. And the guy wants to commit suicide, he typically lost his job, and he has no way to provide for his family. And he thinks the only way to provide for his family is if he killed himself, the insurance company will pay for that.

Now, what most of us would want to do in this situation, we come in and say, "Hey, look, by the way, the insurance company's not going to pay out if you kill yourself. You should just skip that right away." But if somebody is thinking about killing themselves, that's not going to solve their problem. They're highly emotionally volatile, and they could do anything at any moment. And so he doesn't do that. He starts by starting conversation. "Hey, I'm Greg. Are you okay?" Great. Okay. And start having a conversation.

Start saying, "Why are you here? Tell me about you. What do you care about?" And the guy says, "Oh look, I'm worried about providing for my family." And Greg says, "Oh, you sound like you care a lot about your family." "Yeah, I do. I've got two great boys. I want them to be wonderful young men." And Greg says, "Oh, tell me about your boys." And so the guy starts talking about his boys, and how he takes

them fishing and how we teach them to be polite and how he wants them to grow up and all those wonderful, wonderful things.

They talk about their kids for a number of minutes and they talk about some other things. At a certain point in the conversation, Greg goes, "Wow! If you kill yourself today, your kids will lose the best friend they've ever had." And then he pauses for just a moment. But he has done really cleverly, he said, look, I asked all these questions. I know all these things about the person I'm trying to change, but rather than saying, hey, don't kill yourself. Because if I tell you what to do, they push back. That's the idea of reactants.

Instead, he asked questions to find out, well, what does that person care about? And then show that person how the best way to reach what they want is to do what he wanted to do in the first place. And so that's why questions are so powerful. We've got to start with understanding. Start by understanding the person we're trying to change, and only then can we reach the desired outcome.

Larry Bernstein:

We had a book club a couple of years ago with another Wharton professor, Stuart Diamond, who is in your negotiation department at Wharton. In his book, *Getting More*, he also emphasizes the importance of when you're in negotiation with a third party, to try to understand as much as possible. One of my favorite quotes he gave was in a negotiation, the other side called him an asshole. And he said, "Tell me more. Tell me why I'm an asshole."

So he could just continue to better understand the nature of what was causing that sort of riff. When you do want to change someone's mind, more broadly from not killing themselves, for example, but maybe to encourage them to buy a product, you may not have a chance to ask them about their product. In your mind, what you have to do is more surveys to better appreciate the nature of the consumer experience? How do you find out more when you don't know the person across you're trying to persuade?

Jonah Berger:

Yeah. I mean, there's lots of different ways. Reactants is all about the idea of, too often we push people. And what do people do when they're pushed? They push back. Too often we assume if we just tell people what to do, they'll do it. But if we tell people what to do, they're not going to be likely to do it. They're often going to say no. I talk a lot about that chapter, about how we allow for agency. How do we give people back some sense of freedom and control, whether through choices or other ways, so that they feel like they're a participant in the process. I'm happy to go through one or two of the barriers, it's useful, but there are lots of different strategies for collecting information.

Larry Bernstein:

In the book, you discuss politics a little bit as well, and how to persuade a population to go on with your ideas. One example you gave was for Brexit, where you said that the winning campaign was, let's go back to where we were before ... I forgot what the exact title was. How effective do you think political persuasion is, is by using the method that you've just discussed? Using the catalyst?

Jonah Berger:

What's amazing is that how challenging change in politics is? We think nobody changes their mind in politics. We think the world's extremely divisive at the moment and nobody changes. But I talked to a number of people in the book who did change. Who did change sides and talk a lot about their stories and how other people were able to get them to change. I tell the story and dig into the science behind

deep canvassing, for example, which was able to get strongly conservative voters to support transgender rights. What they didn't do is come in and say, hey, you should support transgender rights. Let me tell you why you should support transgender rights.

Instead they use a technique which bridges the gap and finds points in common and uses that to get people to change. We think that information will solve the problem. We think, oh, look, let me just expose people to information on the other side. I talk a lot about a study that was done a couple of years ago by Duke sociologist who tried exactly that. He said, great, information works. We'll give people information from the other side. We'll give Republicans information about Democrats, and Democrats information about Republicans. They had people on Twitter, for example, follow boxes that posted information from the other side.

The notion is that information works right. Oh, the reason for political polarization is just lack of information. If you just reach across the aisle and talk to other people on the other side, that would create change. It didn't work. In fact, it backfired. Giving people information about what the other side thought, made them more polarized, not less. And so it's not just about giving people information, it's about giving people information in the right way.

In the distance chapter, for example, talk a lot about asking for less and then asking for more. People are too far from where we are at the moment. So far, they're even unwilling to listen to the possibility of changing. We really need to start with them and where they are, put information or ideas that are near where they are already, and move them a little bit in one way, and then a little bit further.

Product designers often call the stepping stones. Particularly when trying to make big change, they don't just roll out a new version of product, it's completely different. Instead what they often do, is they roll out micro versions of the product that are moving in the right direction. Maybe it's not as advanced as the whole new product is, but it gets people to adopt a newer technology, and newer technology, and newer technology, and suddenly they look and they've crossed the river.

If you say, "Hey, across this big wide river, it's going to be great on the other side." People say, "No, I'm fine where I am. I'm going to get wet." But if there's stepping stones along the way, it's easy for them to jump from one thing to the next and eventually make that big change. We've got to chunk the change in something. It's going to take big change, break it down into smaller, more manageable chunks, and then people be more likely to move.

Larry Bernstein:

Sometimes what you're describing is we're trying to persuade someone to do something that they don't want to do, but what happens if you want to help them do something that they do want to do? I'll give you an example. Many people want to diet and lose five or 10 pounds. They know that eating too much is the cause, but they're somehow unable to change their patterns of behavior. How can someone help someone do what they want to do? How do they help them change the behaviors that they know are problematic?

Jonah Berger:

I think the key question is to figure out, well, what's the barrier getting in the way? That's the first question. Too often, we jump to the solution without knowing what the problem is. When you go to a doctor's office, the doctors doesn't start by saying, let me put a cast right away. The doctor starts with saying, "Oh, well, tell me about the problem." It's only once they understand the problem, do they prescribe a solution?

So I would say the same thing. In terms of people that are trying to lose weight, well, what's the issue? Is it that they don't remember to eat healthier? They don't remember to exercise? That they don't want to eat healthier? That they don't want to exercise? Or is it something else? And depending on what the barrier is, there may be different solutions that may be more or less effective.

And so really have to start by understanding the problem before we can prescribe the solution. I think too often, if you want something very quick, you want the quick and easy thing, I do so many interviews where someone says, oh, well, there are five barriers, tell me the most important one. Like, well, there are five barriers for a reason. All of them are important. If we're weeding the backyard, the fastest way to weed the yard is to rip off the top of the weed and move on. But then a week later, it's going to grow back.

And so to really change things, we've got to find that root. We've got to figure out the underlying reason for a problem or the underlying barrier getting in the way. And only once we understand that, can we really create change more effectively.

Larry Bernstein:

Why is your work in the marketing department of all places? Why isn't it in psychology? Why isn't it negotiation? How come your work ended up in a marketing department?

Jonah Berger:

I publish both in marketing and management and psychology. I publish papers in all those disciplines. At the core of what we're talking about is influence, which is certainly at the core of marketing topic. But the same ideas that help marketers sell products and ideas, are what help people change their bosses or colleagues' mind. Are what help parents change their kids' behavior.

I think one key insight that marketing really has that's been lost in some other disciplines is a focus on the customer. I teach the core at the Wharton school. All of our MBAs come in, they take a marketing class to start, and I head the core program for us. One key principle of that program is start with customers, start with understanding. Don't start with the product or service you have. Don't be product-focused, be customer-focused. Who is your customer? What do they need? Understand them.

We often think about marketing is selling people things. Marketing is not about selling people things. Marketing is about understanding people's needs and meeting those needs. Good marketing isn't about selling what you can make. Isn't just saying, okay, I've got this thing, how do I sell it? Good marketing is really about making what you can sell. Starting by saying, what is that need? Let me discover. Let me use research to understand that need through customer insight and other ways, then let me design products or services that meet those needs, and then let me communicate the value that I've created and capture the value at the end of that chain. It would be much more effective if we understand the customer rather than just starting with that.

Larry Bernstein:

As a minor business is this podcast, and most of the people that listen to this call are friends of mine, but there's also friends of friends. How important are peer effects in success of marketing a product?

My first book, Contagious, is all about peer effects. All about word of mouth. Netflix really changed my life, and that book is how, in some sense, got to this new book, The Catalyst. Before that book, I was a teacher and a researcher and that was it. Contagious is my first book. It's now out in over half a million

copies and over 35 languages around the world. I got to work with a lot of companies and organizations. Everything from large Fortune 500, like the Googles and Nikes and Apples of the world, to small startups, for-profits, nonprofits.

I learned a lot about marketing. I learned a lot about influence. And what I realized is that similar to what I said at the beginning, everyone basically has something that they want to change. And so I realized, hey, pushing wasn't working. And so that's what led me on this journey to really understand these other drivers of behavior. Peer effects are very important. Contagious talks a lot about what drives word of mouth and how peer effects work. I'm certainly a big believer in this.

Larry Bernstein:

Jonah, thank you so much for your time.

Jonah Berger:

No problem. Thanks so much for having me.

Larry Bernstein:

Take care.