

## Credibility

Over the past sixty years researchers have come to the conclusion that one of the fundamental basics of persuasive communication is that the source of the message needs to be credible. Aristotle argued that credibility was the most potent form of persuasion (Smith 1998). The greater the level of credibility the greater the persuasiveness and influential impact the person will have. Conversely, the lower degree of credibility a person possesses the less persuasiveness and influential impact. While there are exceptions to this rule, it remains the general consensus. If this is the case then we need to define exactly what credibility is, what makes a person credible, and how can you develop or increase your own credibility.

O'Keefe (1) (as cited in Gass & Seiter, 2011 p. 74) provides a definition of credibility which states: "judgments made by a perceiver (e.g., a message recipient) concerning the believability of a communicator". Gass and Seiter go on to say that this definition would extend to institutions as well. Let's take a moment to break this definition down.

First, the judgment is made by the perceiver. Credibility is audience based. Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder,

so is credibility. People are credible because we, as the perceivers, the listeners or audience, determine they are. A source of a message may have knowledge, skills, past success, and talents, but the value and worth of these attributes are determined by the listener. They are not intrinsically valuable or have specific worth. We the listeners determine that worth and therefore value can vary from person to person. As Craig Smith (2) (1998) states "Speakers do not gain credibility with an audience by being ethical; they gain credibility by being ethical in ways that the particular audience admires" (p.78). A person may be ethical, honest, and caring, but if the audience doesn't perceived it; if they don't recognize those traits and characteristics in the speaker, then they are for not as it relates to the message being persuasive and the speaker being credible.

Credibility is not one dimensional. It can have several different characteristics depending on the person receiving the message. Often our determination of who is credible consists of several factors which we combine to make our judgment. If one were to say that a person was smart, that conclusion would probably include several different elements such as education, accomplishments, test scores, GPA, professional position, income, past successful decisions etc. The same is true for

credibility; it is a combination of characteristics that cause us to decide how one is judged.

Finally, a person can be credible in one situation and not another. The situational and dynamic aspects of credibility, allows for a person to be held in high regards with one person or audience, but then turn around and not be perceived as a credible source by another person or audience in a different context. Many find me to be a credible source when it comes to human communication, but not so much when it comes to biology. The reason for this is because credibility is made up of specific "dimensions". And as we will see these dimensions rely on specific elements within the speaker. These elements or dimensions determine a person's credibility in the eyes of the beholder.

The question of what makes a person credible goes back at least as far as Aristotle. He wrote in his famous *Rhetoric* that there are three elements that provide proof of "ethos" or credibility and lead us to believe a speaker; they are intelligence, character, and goodwill (Cooper (3)1932; Smith 1998). As researchers have found a couple thousand years later, Aristotle was on the right track (although his terminology has been corrected a bit). It has been determined with a high degree of certainty that there are three fundamental dimensions that we

use to determine a person's credibility; they are expertise, trustworthiness, and goodwill. Therefore if you want to create or enhance your credibility, you will need to focus on these three primary dimensions.

Expertise is based upon a person's capability to make correct assertions predicated upon their training, past experience, accomplishment, degrees, position etc. We confer this label on them, because in our opinion we believe they know what they are talking about, at least in a particular context. Expertise however is more than knowing facts and truths; it is the ability to communicate those facts and truths in a way that your audience can understand.

Sometimes expertise can be explicit in that it is measurable. We can see the accomplishments or the demonstration of the person's expertise. Other times it is implicit. We simply see a "Dr." before the name or a "PhD" after the name and we automatically assume they are well versed in the subject being discussed and their opinion should be considered as one coming from an expert.

Often we are asked to bestow this level of credibility on someone because they have showed expertise concerning topic "A" and therefore we should accept them as an authority concerning topic "B" as well. This is often seen with celebrity

endorsements. A great tennis player who has won several championships is considered an expert when it comes to tennis and let's say tennis rackets. This expertise is then transferred to this person in promoting cameras. If she says it is a good camera then it must be a good camera because after all she is a champion tennis player and she should know what she is talking about. While part of this type of persuasion is relying on what is known as the halo effect where we take a degree of liking for a person and transfer it to another person or product, it is also a form of persuasion using expertise.

Trustworthiness concerns itself with integrity and honesty. You may be an expert but can I trust you? Tseng and Fogg (4) (1999) point out that, "trust indicates a positive belief about the perceived reliability of, dependability of, and confidence in a person, object, or process" (p. 41). Trust can also refer to beliefs and behaviors that are associated with the acceptance of risk and vulnerability. If I trust you I am more willing to make myself vulnerable or accept risks that I would not ordinarily do.

Goodwill, or perceived caring, is called the lost dimension of credibility by McCroskey and Teven (5) (1999) since it was one of the three elements originally mentioned by Aristotle. Goodwill is when we care about another person and we have their best interest at heart. According to McCroskey and Teven, goodwill can be demonstrated in three ways, understanding, empathy, and responsiveness. In order to

demonstrate goodwill, one must sincerely engage in one or all of these. Let's take a closer, albeit brief, look at each.

Understanding is the act of understanding the other person's feelings or opinions. It is a matter of "getting it" when you communicate with them. You have an insight to who they are, what they are thinking and most certainly what they are saying. The person demonstrating understanding is sensitive to the other's pain and concerns. All this adds up to demonstrating you care about them.

Empathy is a matter of identification; identifying with the other person's feelings, ideas or needs. It goes beyond simply understanding, but accepting these things as being valid. It doesn't however, imply agreeing with them. Empathy is saying I feel your pain, I feel your hurt, or I've been there. It is an act of validation.

Responsiveness is a matter of acknowledgment; acknowledging the person's communication attempt through mindful listening, and proper feedback, both verbal and nonverbal. It is giving them focused attention, by either blocking out or ignoring any internal or external noise that might distract us. Responsiveness says they are all that matters at that moment.

Now that we have discussed the three primary dimensions of credibility and how we can better position our own credibility, it would be appropriate to discuss the four types of credibility. Tseng & Fogg (6) (1999) identified four specific types of credibility. These are not new nor are they presented as any form of discovery, but

rather they are presented for generalization and clarification in order to provide a broader spectrum for discussing credibility. The four types of credibility are presumed, reputed, surface, and experienced.

Presumed credibility is predicated upon general assumptions we have, as listeners of a message, in our own minds about a person, position or thing. Often these generalizations involve stereotypes and similar assumptions which contribute to our judgment of the credibility of the speaker. "Used car salesmen are not trustworthy" is an example in which we stereotype these sales people and therefore we determine that they lack credibility.

Reputed credibility involves the recommendation of third parties. For example, when someone has been conferred a degree, we would imply that because the university deems them qualified to receive the degree then they would seem to be a credible source as it relates to the specific discipline associated with the degree they have received. We may know little to nothing about them, however, on the "recommendation" of the third party (the university) we bestow upon them credibility. The third party could include institutions which might award degrees, certifications, licenses etc., other

persons in the specific field, usually people of high regard, or perhaps family or friend to name a few.

Surface credibility is closely aligned with first impressions. It is based on simple inspection. This is truly an act of judging a book by its cover. We may judge someone credible by the clothes they wear, the way they speak, physical characteristics, or perhaps the way they shake your hand. These various aspects of a person, or thing, will consciously or non-consciously influence our perceptions and therefore our judgment of credibility.

Experienced (or earned) credibility is predicated upon first hand experience. Having interaction with a person over time may provide you with enough exposure to their actions and attitudes that you can determine that they have a certain degree of credibility. If you were to do business with someone for several years and they always provided you with good service, low prices and always corrected any issues that may have arisen, you very well may consider them to be credible.

We have defined credibility. We have looked at the different dimensions that make up credibility, and reviewed the different types of credibility. You now have the insights and direction to build or enhance your level of personal ethos. In

doing so, you will position yourself to be a better and more effective change agent of human attitude and behavior.