The Guru of Woo

Can't get co-workers to cooperate on an important project? Boss won't listen to your ideas? The Wharton School's Richard Shell can help. **By Caroline Tiger**

There's a video résumé by a Yale student named Aleksey Vayner that quickly became a viral Internet phenomenon when it was leaked from the financial services giant, UBS—the recipient of Vayner's job application—in fall 2006. The seven-minute video, entitled "Impossible Is Nothing," features a smooth-skinned, bespectacled braggart making hyperbolic claims of super-human strength, intelligence, and accomplishments: Vayner's show and tell includes footage of him bench-pressing nearly 500 pounds, serving a tennis ball at 140 m.p.h., and qualifying for the Olympics in downhill skiing. Between these athletic feats, he sits in front of a bookcase, dressed in a business suit, answering questions posed by an off-camera interviewer.

It's a safe bet that none of the many, many web surfers who snickered over the video (no longer available, by the way) devoted anything like the attention lavished upon it by the participants in Professor G. Richard Shell's Strategic Persuasion Workshop at Wharton's Aresty Institute of Executive Education when Shell plays the video on the morning of day one of a three-day seminar in March. After Vayner splits a stack of bricks with a bare hand and the credits begin to roll, Shell walks to the center of the room to begin to dissect this example of how *not* to be persuasive. He asks the 33 men and women who are assembled, "What's wrong with this communication as a moment of persuasion?"

What's *right* about it? Hardly anything, at least as far as this audience and the general Internet-using public in America is concerned. "But when we showed this video to a group in Mumbai," Shell tells the workshop participants, "No one laughed." In India, he reports, they took Vayner seriously. The Yalie didn't hit the target at UBS, but he might've scored a job in Mumbai or with a PR firm in New York, several of which offered to hire him after the video spread. (Vayner declined.) "Your credibility is in the eye of the audience," explains Shell, Wharton's Thomas Gerrity Professor and professor of legal studies and business ethics. And credibility is one key to persuasion, the intangible notion that the Strategic Persuasion Workshop, launched in 2007 to coincide with the publication of *The Art of Woo: Using Strategic Persuasion To Sell Your Ideas* (Portfolio/Penguin), promises to clarify.

A copy of the book that Shell co-wrote with his workshop co-instructor, Mario Moussa, sits on the table in front of each student in the conference room. Earlier that morning, they went around the room, introducing themselves and sketching the specific challenges that brought them here from as far as Spain and Nebraska. Among the group is a founder of a brand-new Berkeley nonprofit who's struggling to sell her mission to all levels of supporters; a director of a sales team at a personal-care company who wants to land a Wal-Mart account; and a group manager at the Federal Reserve who has been charged with effecting change throughout many branches where the employees are resistant. One participant, the director for educational partnerships at a Department of Energy national research laboratory in Idaho, is here, he says, because his boss told him, "Andy, you need to be more persuasive."

If Shell and Moussa's low-key, friendly introductions haven't put the room at ease, Andy's half-joking, half-serious comment does. His boss's observation is what they all imagine their own boss or colleagues to be thinking about them, even if the notion hasn't been expressed so plainly. After Andy's comment, Shell rips

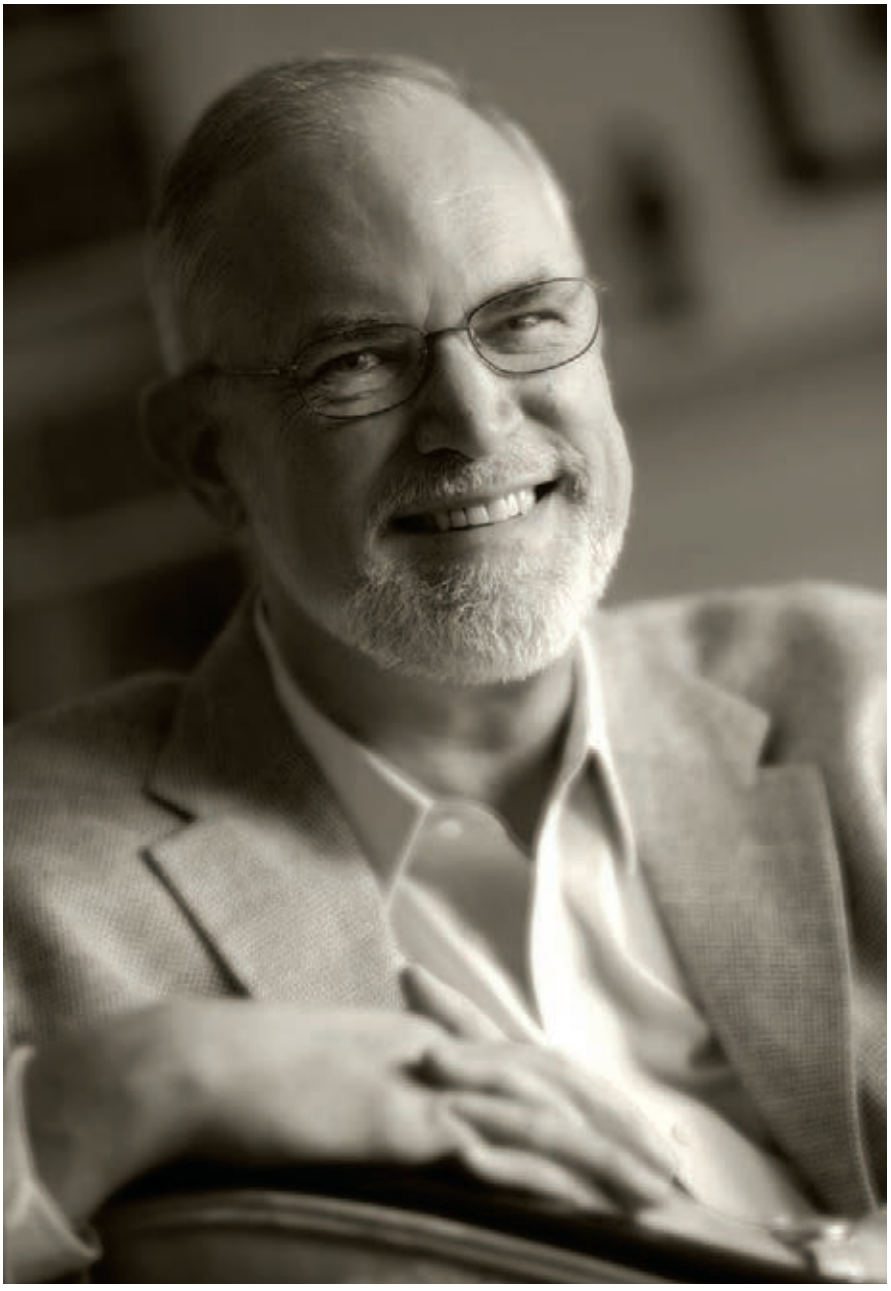
ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS SHARP

off the rest of the Band-Aid. "Other people are seeing you the way we just saw Aleksey Vayner," he says. "We're going to teach you how to persuade them otherwise."

Unlike Vayner, Shell and Moussa possess plenty of credibility in the eyes of this audience and in those of the businesspeople to whom they travel to consult—a week earlier, Shell was dodging engineers on scooters at Google's headquarters. He's traveled to Davos to speak at the World Economic Forum and around the country and the world to consult for firms including Morgan Stanley, Citibank, Merck, General Electric, and Johnson & Johnson. Moussa, a principal at the Center for Applied Research (CFAR), a Philadelphia-based management-consulting firm that began life as a Wharton research center, works regularly with pharmaceutical firms and hospitals on forging better collaborative relationships between the commercial side and the scientists. Plus, there's that book they spent three years researching and writing. It came out last fall and already an audio version is in the works; and the book is available in Chinese, Portuguese, and in the UK.

As Shell and Moussa recount during the persuasion workshop, both noticed that the students in their Executive Negotiation Workshops (another Shell co-directed effort in which Moussa also teaches) wanted to talk about problems they were having with internal negotiations. "People today are working more across unit boundaries, across offices," Moussa explains. "And every unit has its own culture, its own way of speaking, its own way of behaving, its own distinctive beliefs. These are differences that aren't immediately obvious. You might not see them because you are working for the same company, and your mind-set is usually that you are on the same team."

Even the most trivial decisions in a company, Shell and Moussa say, often involve at least eight people. Larger decisions can involve up to 20. The two show what a manufacturing company's organizational chart is supposed to look like, with the senior vice president at the top and three department managers directly beneath. The managers report to the senior vice president, and each manager has two or more employees who report to him or her.



Among the five "persuasion styles" laid out in *The Art of Woo*, Shell puts himself in the "chess player" category.

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Then they juxtapose this orderly chart with one that shows the real power dynamics at play at this mock manufacturing company. This is no tidy family tree. There are large clusters of employees around a few people who are not at the top of the hierarchy but who are clearly the kingmakers. A huge ladder runs up one side of the chart, and somewhere in the middle of the jumble, one pour soul floats to the bottom, his fall softened by a parachute.

In such a fluid corporate culture, "because I said so" and "or else" are not effective strategies. *The Art of Woo* offers a four-step method that focuses on persuasion via relationship-building rather than force and authoritarianism. The first step is to assess yourself and the person or people you seek to persuade. Then strategize to break through a list of possible barriers that might include your own lack of credibility or perhaps the outdated belief-system of a traditionally minded organization. Third, figure out how to pitch your idea in the most compelling way—that is, one that will move the listener. And finally, close the deal by securing commitments.

"What is Bono doing that Aleksey wasn't doing?" Shell asks the class.

"People persuade themselves," says Moussa. "So, you can try to bulldoze someone and you may be successful in getting them to say yes, but that is a *yes* that probably will not stick. What sticks is, as we put it, removing the barriers to being heard and, once you have done that, having a good give-and-take discussion. That takes time."

The book's moment of conception actually took about a minute, but add in the factors preceding it, and an idea campaign unfolds in hindsight. "Do you think it's a mistake that we wrote the book before we launched the workshops?" Moussa asks the class at one point, giving them a peek at the blueprint for the co-authors' campaign to sell their take on the art and science of selling.

The path to the workshop and book began, for Shell, with a little piece of paper that's been hanging above his desk for nearly a decade. It contains a handwritten list of four books that Shell knew he wanted to write. Number one on the list, a negotiation book, was realized in 1999. *Bargaining for Advantage: Negotiation Strategies for Reasonable People* (Viking Press/Penguin Books) ["Off the Shelf," Nov|Dec 1999] has sold more than 120,000 copies and has been translated into 12 languages. His second planned book, on law and strategy, was published by Crown Business/Random House in 2004 as *Make the Rules or Your Rivals Will*. (That one didn't do as well, and is currently out of print.)

Third on the list: a book about negotiating inside organizations.

Shell did preliminary research on internal negotiation after the release of *Make the Rules*, but he shelved the idea when he wasn't satisfied with his attempts to get a handle on the subject. Soon afterward he was talking with Moussa on campus about the requests in the negotiation workshops to talk about internal negotiations.

"That kind of reminded me of the book on my list that I hadn't crossed off yet," Shell says over a plate of pasta after the morning of the Vayner video, "and I thought, 'Mario is a change consultant. He works for organizations all the time,' which I do not. And he just seemed to be the perfect person to write this book with if I was ever going to do it." He asked Moussa if he'd like to collaborate on a book. Moussa asked if he was serious. Shell replied, "Yes. It's a book I've been wanting to write." And Moussa said, "Okay."

Between forkfuls of pasta, Shell says, "It was the easiest idea sale I've ever had to make."

It helped that Shell and Moussa already had a good working dynamic. In *Woo*-speak, they'd established a Trust-Level relationship. Writing a book together can be a long, arduous journey, but the two already knew each other well enough to have formed solid and positive beliefs about the other's character, motives, and traits. Plus, Shell was dripping with credibility. He had that best-selling book behind him. He had launched Wharton's Executive Negotiation Workshop in 1996, and his link with Wharton's negotiation curriculum actually stretched back to its beginnings.

Shell first became interested in negotiation as a recent law-school grad working at a big firm in Boston in the early 1980s. "If you're a lawyer, you're a professional advocate and professional persuader," he says. "I wasn't that aware of the process. I was just doing it." Still, he knew he had a strong interest in mediation, arbitration, and negotiation as alternatives to litigation.

When he decided to transition from practicing law to teaching it, he interviewed at a number of law schools. Then Wharton called. They were seeking faculty for the legal-studies department, and they'd picked up his CV. He had a business background from his law practice and they liked an article he'd written on arbitration. They offered him a job. "I realized when I lined up my options that being at Wharton meant being at the top of that particular genre, and that the law schools I was looking at were good law schools, but they weren't the best law schools," says Shell.

The professor's measured analysis of the situation—the laying out of his options, the weighing of pros and cons—fits with his self-ascribed "persuasion style": chess player. As part of the *Art of Woo's* first step, the book provides diagnostic tests to help categorize yourself within one of five persuasion styles. The chess-player is described as a low-key personality who makes strategic, behind-the-scenes moves.

The real-world example that Shell and Moussa use to personify the style is John D. Rockefeller, who quietly extracted himself from an unsavory business partnership early in his career by making his partners think his leave-taking was their idea and by lining up powerful supporters to buoy him once he was released. Four others illustrate the four remaining persuasion-styles: driver (Intel CEO Andy Grove), commander (J.P. Morgan), promoter (Andrew Carnegie), and advocate (Sam Walton). These are some of the hundreds of businesspeople, politicians, screenwriters, producers, activists, religious leaders, rock stars, and military leaders whose biographies Shell, Moussa, and their research assistants pored over and transformed into case studies.

Once at Wharton, Shell's affinity for chess playing continued to be effective. He patiently laid the groundwork to fill a void he noticed immediately in Wharton's curriculum. There was no negotiation course. "It took me a couple years," he says, "to come up to speed within the working community to start a course of my own." He attended a summer program at MIT to learn how to teach negotiation from leading practitioners, including Max Bazerman and Larry Suskind. Then he collaborated with behavioral psychologists in the Decision Sciences (now Op-

erations and Information Management) Department, who were also interested in the topic, and they developed the course together.

Read between the lines of this lead-up to Shell's successful career at Wharton and his well-received books on negotiation and persuasion and you see a man who's a patient, skillful, and effective social strategist. Shell arrived at Penn with the credibility cast by a BA in English from Princeton University and a JD from the University of Virginia. Learning negotiation from the masters in the field and collaborating with another Wharton department to introduce the new course were surely steps that added to the success of his venture.

Shell has used his persuasion skills behind the scenes of other projects, such as Penn's West Philadelphia initiatives launched in the 1990s, which included helping to set up the University City business-improvement district, opening the Penn-Alexander public elementary school, providing mortgage assistance for homeowners, and investing in renovating buildings in the neighborhood surrounding campus. Shell had lived in the neighborhood since arriving in Philadelphia in 1986 with his wife, a journalist. There they raised their two sons, Ned, 18, and Ben, 25. (Shell doesn't use *Woo* on his sons; he says he's more often the object of their persuasive skills.) Shell was part of a group of University faculty and staff that put together a study for then-Penn President Judith Rodin CW'66 Hon'04 on how other universities were managing their own community relations. A typical chess player, Shell didn't do the presenting, but he did write the report.

He was chair of the Legal Studies department when Wharton changed its curriculum in the late 1990s. Though a bit guarded about specifying how and why persuasion was necessary at this juncture, Shell points to it as a time when his theories were tested and proven. "The process of getting new curriculum through any school requires a lot of knowing when to accommodate and when to push and what to push," he says. And of course, a professor is every day in the business of selling ideas in a way that will excite and inspire students. Shell has taught in MBA, undergraduate, and executive-education courses at Wharton, as well as in the Law School, and he has won teaching awards in all of Wharton's degree programs, most recently for the 2007-2008 academic year.

After Shell and Moussa show the video of Vayner, they counter that bad example with one of Bono, the man they've dubbed "the master of Woo." The Irish-born rock star-turned-activist keeps popping up in the book, where he's praised for his ability to monitor his audience's reaction and switch his own "persuasion channel" in an instant to best connect with whomever is listening. In September 2000, he sells his ideas during a visit to conservative Senator Jesse Helms' office by presenting Africa's problems in terms of the Scripture. The conversation yields an appropriation of $435 million for the continent's debt relief. When he visits Microsoft and the Gates Foundation, he drowns his hosts in data. He speaks to them via the geek channel. It's almost like the middle-aged rock star with the wraparound sunglasses is equipped with an otherworldly antenna that allows him to tune in to each individual's hot button. He's a chameleon, able to switch styles in an instant.

The video shows Bono accepting the Chairman's Award at the NAACP Image Awards ceremony. The first thing the star does when he mounts the stage is to express his admiration for presenters Julian Bond and Tyra Banks and for the NAACP. Then he builds a bridge between himself and the audience by linking their experiences: "I grew up in Ireland," he says, "and when I grew up, Ireland was divided along religious lines, sectarian lines. Young people like me were parched for the vision that poured out of the pulpits of Black America ... "

"What is Bono doing that Aleksey wasn't doing?" Shell asks the class. "He's connecting with the audience. He's immediately acknowledging his social space. He's Bono, but the first thing he makes clear is that he's not as important as they are."

The camera flashes from Bono to his audience, and you can see their expressions change as he speaks. At first they're skeptical. Then their features begin to soften. At the end of the speech, when Bono reaches the climax, when he actually climbs into the pulpit and speaks in the cadence of a preacher—"The poor is where God lives, God is with the mother who has infected her child with the virus that will take both their lives, God is with ... "—they are with him completely. They're on their feet cheering and screaming. The execs in the conference room are impressed.

Shell came across this footage of Bono at the NAACP awards soon after he and Moussa finished the book. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He said, "This is my book!" Bono does everything in his speech that the co-authors advise doing in *Woo*. Then again, it is believable, as these ideas have been around since Aristotle and Cicero. The concept of persuasion is reinvented by every generation, but it's been practiced since Ancient Greece. What the *Art of Woo* hopes to contribute is a means of application and of helping people find their personal *Woo* sweet spot. "It's just a matter of finding your style," Shell tells the class. "Once you're successful at persuasion, the steps are the same. You're not necessarily going to use Bono's steps—he's a visionary, you may have a different style."

When the workshop breaks for lunch, everyone seems deep in thought as they make their way down a long hallway and up one flight of stairs to the lunchroom. Marie catches up with Shell at the elevator to talk about her problem. "What you need to do," he tells her, "is give people an incentive to want change." The woman from the Berkeley nonprofit is waiting to share her observations with Shell—her problem has been not spending the time to build relationships and to plan out an idea campaign. She's been hasty. "You have to be patient," he counsels her. "It takes time."

Aha! moments are dawning all around, and Shell, finishing up his lunch, hurries back to the conference room to hear about more of his students' scenarios. "People come here from all over the world with the most interesting problems," he says, "and Mario and I learn a tremendous amount about organizational cultures, about different persuasion mistakes people make. That just makes us more effective the next class we teach and the next time we edit the book. We'll have a whole new set of stories. So, there's this wonderful loop between the teaching and the writing and the learning. It just goes round and round."◆

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