3. Discrepant Communications and the Dynamics of Attitude Change

Social judgment theory sheds light on an interesting issue. Suppose you wanted to change someone’s attitude. How extreme should your advocacy be? Should you advocate a position that lies far from the person’s existing view, in hopes of achieving partial movement toward your position, or should you play it safe and advocate a position that lies very near to the person’s present view, settling for whatever change you could effect?

Social judgment theory provides an answer to this question. Recall that people view messages that fall within their latitude of acceptance as fair and compelling, whereas they view those that fall within their latitude of rejection as biased and lacking in cogency. Accordingly, you want your message to fall just inside the person’s latitude of acceptance, without crossing over into the person’s latitude of rejection. If you succeed, your message will be subject to an assimilation effect and will be seen as fair-minded and credible; if you fail, your message will be subject to a contrast effect and will be viewed as unfair and unconvincing.

Figure 7.5 illustrates these principles as a function of personal involvement. If the person is highly involved in the issue (see the solid line in Figure 7.5), you’ll need to be conservative in your recommendations because the person’s latitude of acceptance is narrow. If, however, the person is not highly involved in the issue (see the dotted line in Figure 7.5), you can afford to advocate a more extreme position because the person’s latitude of acceptance is broad. In short, the more important an issue is to your audience, the less extreme your advocacy should be (Hovland & Pritzker, 1957).

**FIGURE 7.5**

Predictions Social Judgment Theory Makes about Attitude Change as a Function of Involvement

Under each curve, the shaded areas show the person’s latitude of rejection and the areas without shading show the person’s latitude of acceptance. When involvement is high (solid line), the person’s latitude of acceptance is narrow and maximum attitude change occurs close to the person’s initial attitude. When involvement is low (dotted line), the person’s latitude of acceptance is broad and maximum attitude change occurs far from the person’s initial attitude.