

“It’s Scary...It’s Confusing...It’s Dull”:
How Cybersecurity Advocates
Overcome Negative Perceptions
of Security

Julie Haney and Wayne Lutters
University of Maryland, Baltimore County
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Motivation

Cyber attacks are on the rise, but people often fail to adopt and effectively use security best practices and technologies.



From the audience's perspective, security can be characterized by three major factors: one, it's scary; two, it's confusing; three, it's dull.

--P08

Cybersecurity Advocates

- ***Cybersecurity advocates*** are security professionals who promote and encourage security adoption as a major component of their job
- Examples:
 - Security awareness professionals
 - Secure development champions
 - Security consultants
 - Non-profit security advocacy staff
- Must be effective at communicating security risk, motivating behavior change, and overcoming negative perceptions of security

Research Questions

- What are the professional characteristics and skills that cybersecurity advocates employ in their work?
- What techniques do cybersecurity advocates use to encourage security adoption?

Methodology

- Interviewed 28 cybersecurity advocates
 - 10 females, 18 males
 - Various job roles – e.g., consultants, security engineers, educators
 - Diverse educational backgrounds – 14 with at least one non-tech degree
 - Experienced group – most > 10 years experience in security
 - Multiple sectors - industry, government, higher ed, non-profits
 - Diverse audiences – internal and external
- Questions on work practices, professional motivations, challenges, characteristics of successful advocates
- Grounded Theory methods for data collection and analysis

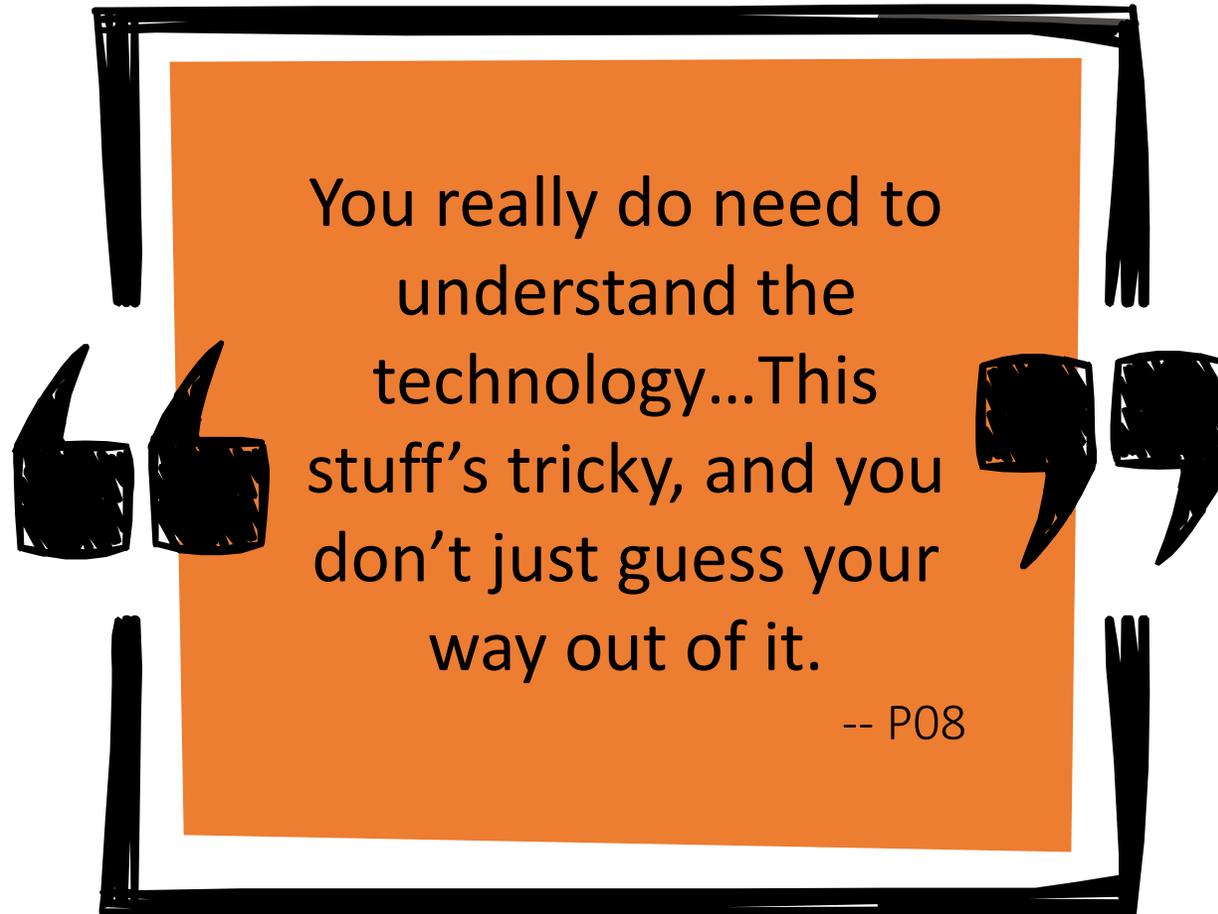
Establishing Trust



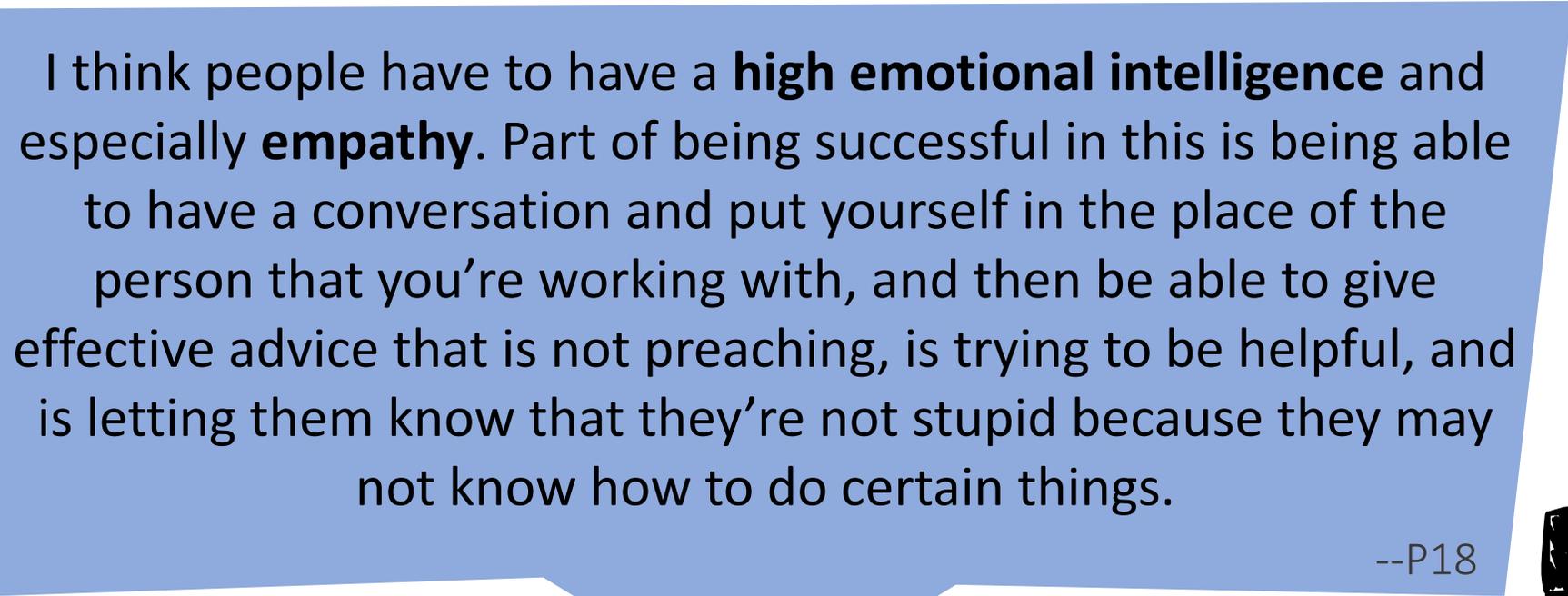
“Trust is the most important thing that I have.”

-- P12

Demonstrating Technical Knowledge



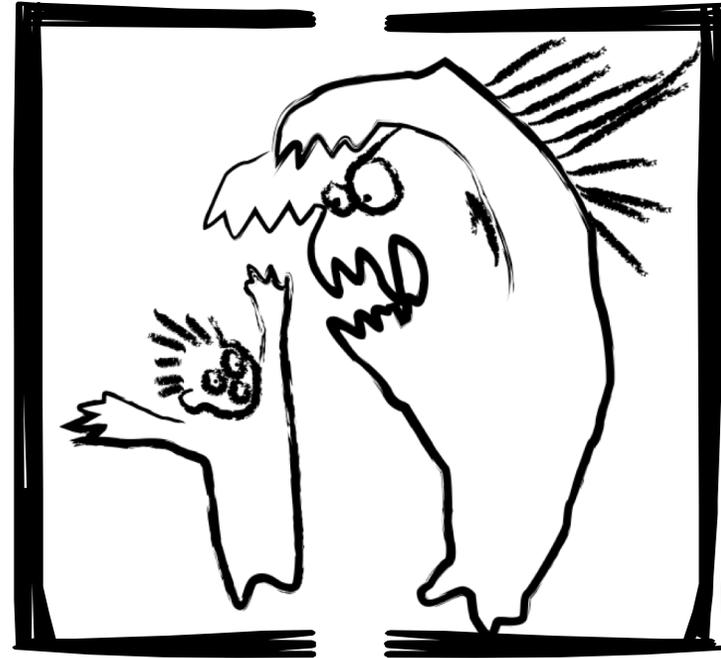
Building Relationships



I think people have to have a **high emotional intelligence** and especially **empathy**. Part of being successful in this is being able to have a conversation and put yourself in the place of the person that you're working with, and then be able to give effective advice that is not preaching, is trying to be helpful, and is letting them know that they're not stupid because they may not know how to do certain things.

--P18

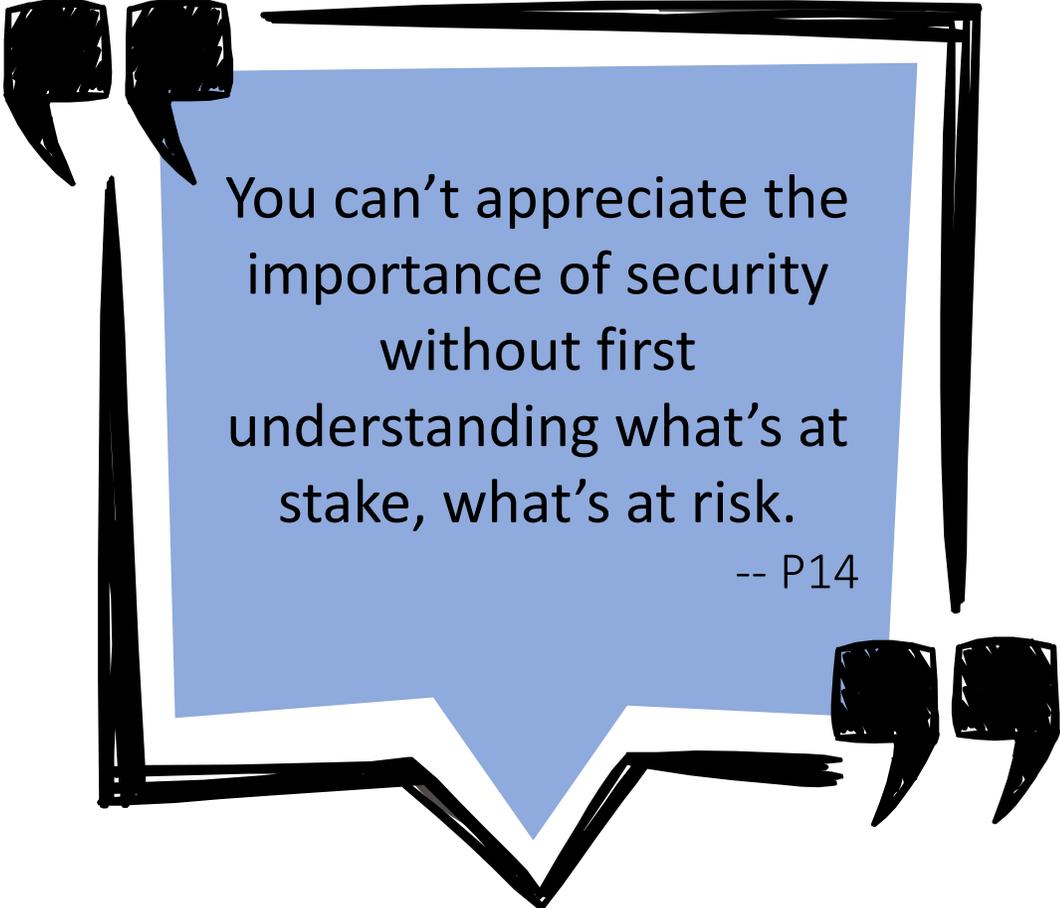
Overcoming “It’s Scary”



“ We’re just really a fear-mongering industry.”

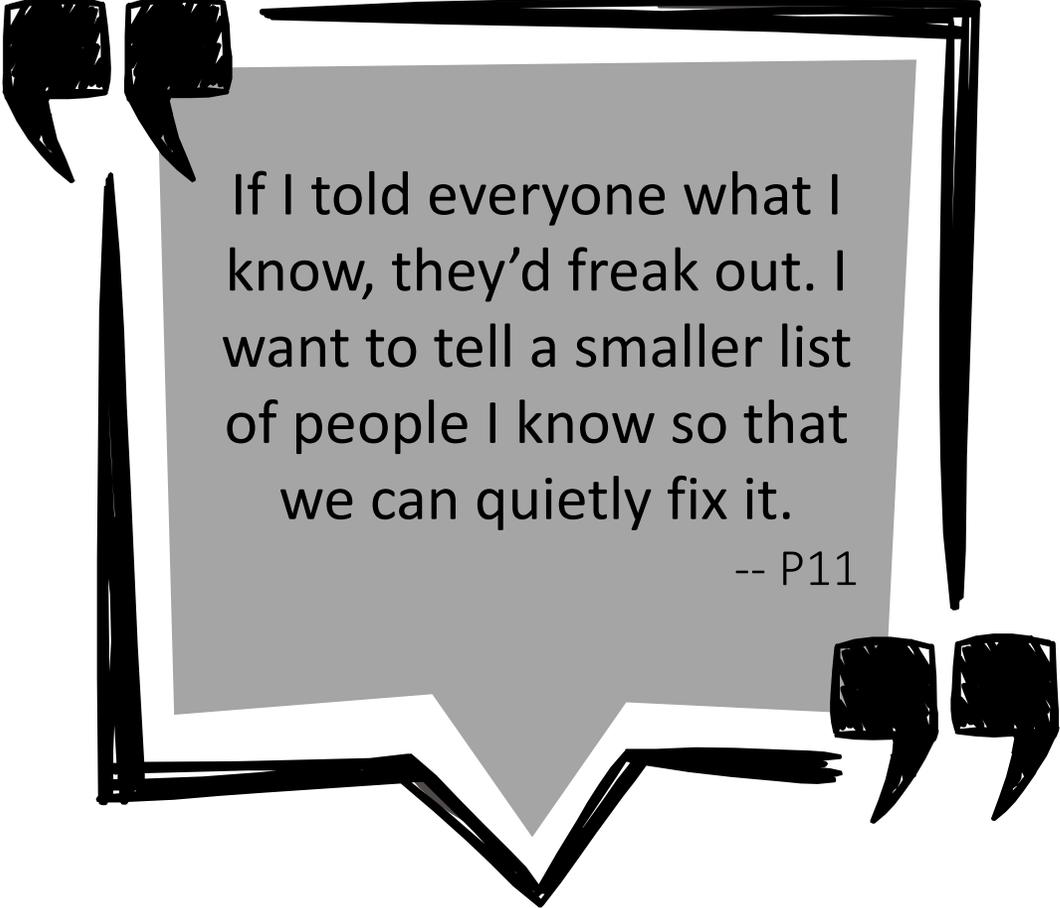
-- P21

Being Honest, Yet Discerning, About Risk



You can't appreciate the importance of security without first understanding what's at stake, what's at risk.

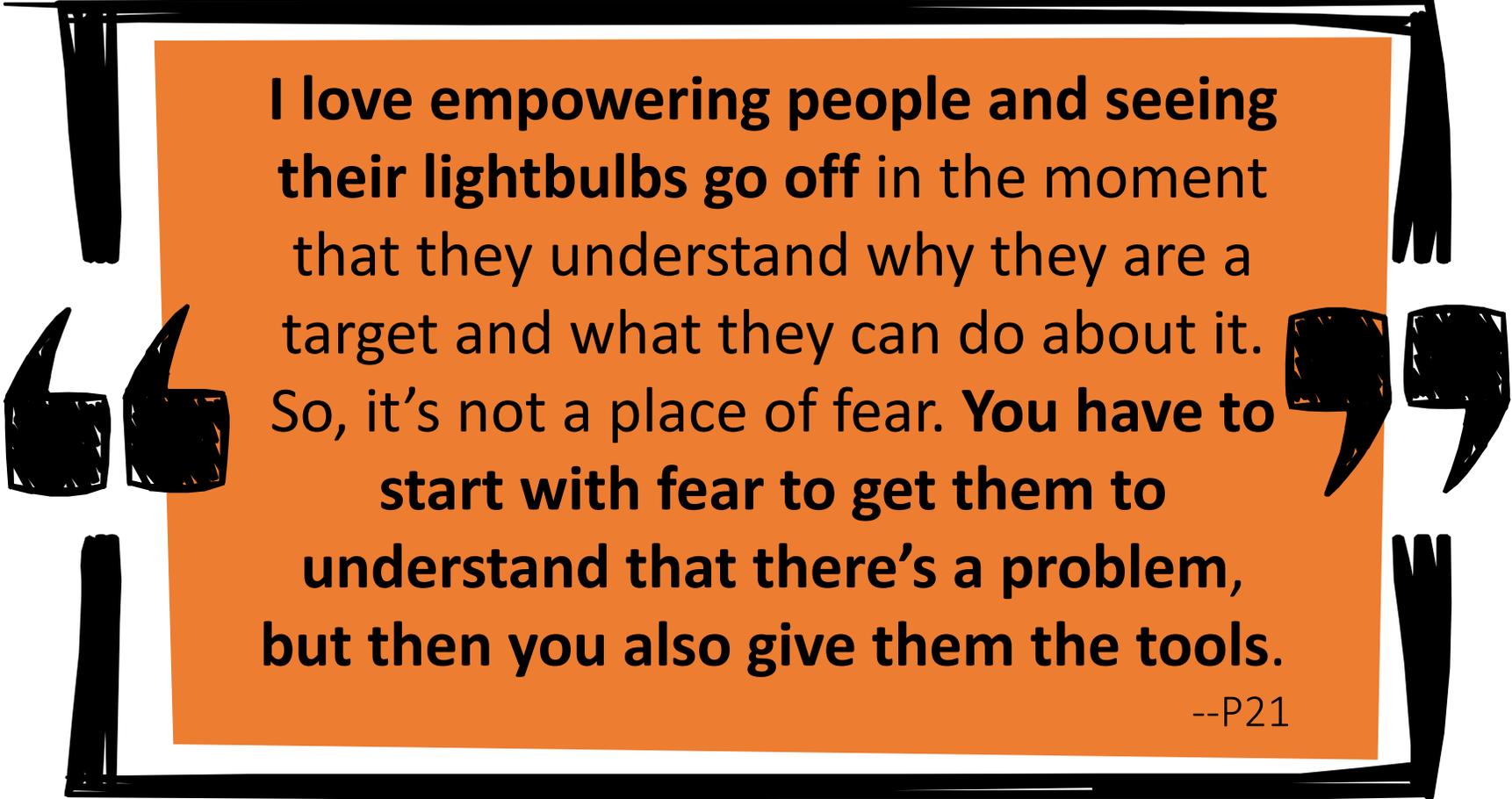
-- P14



If I told everyone what I know, they'd freak out. I want to tell a smaller list of people I know so that we can quietly fix it.

-- P11

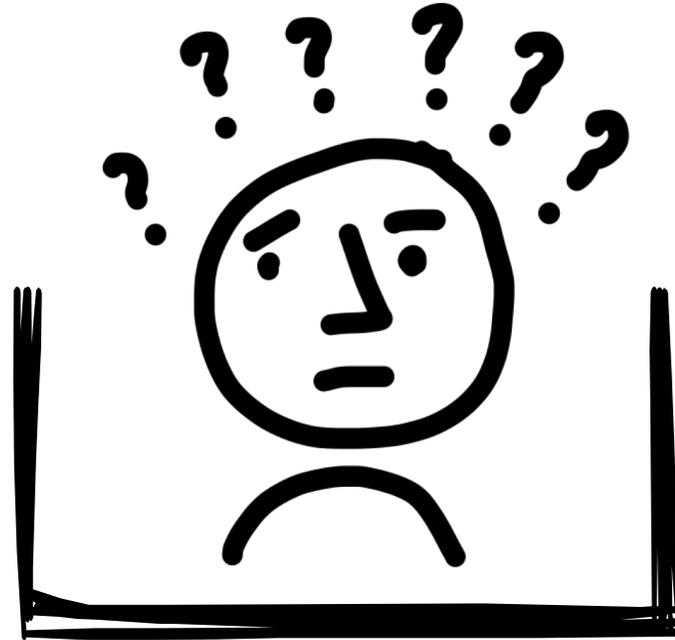
Empowerment



I love empowering people and seeing their lightbulbs go off in the moment that they understand why they are a target and what they can do about it. So, it's not a place of fear. **You have to start with fear to get them to understand that there's a problem, but then you also give them the tools.**

--P21

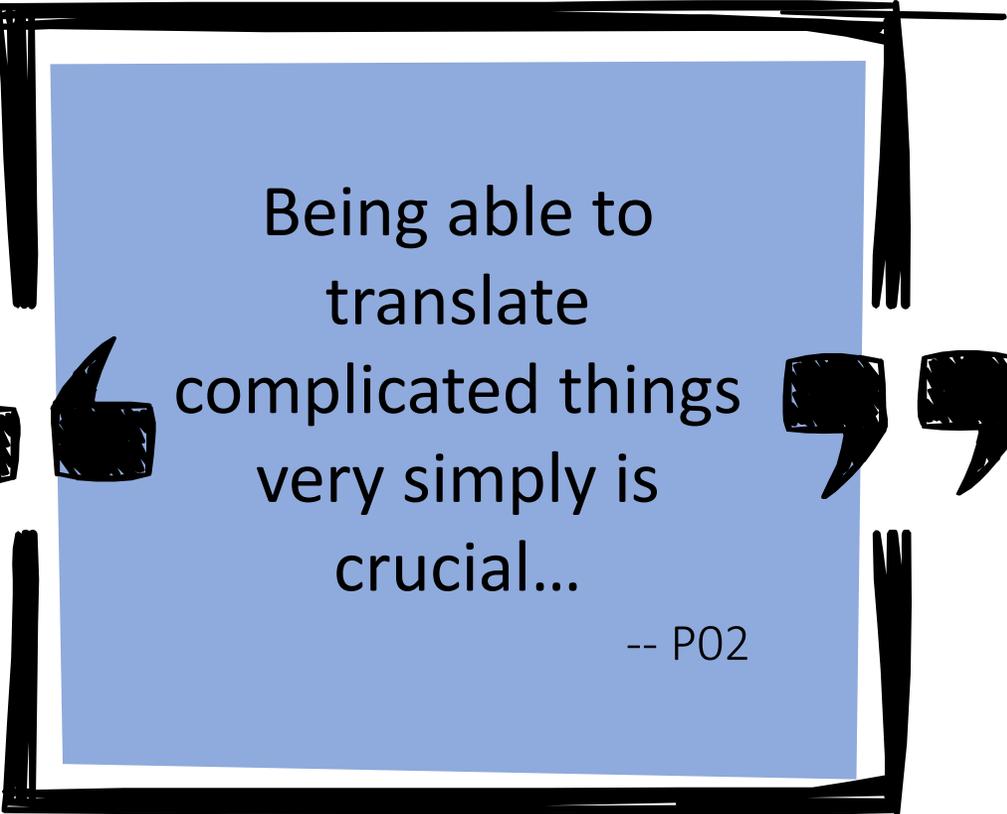
Overcoming “It’s Confusing”



“ Security is mysterious to most people. ”

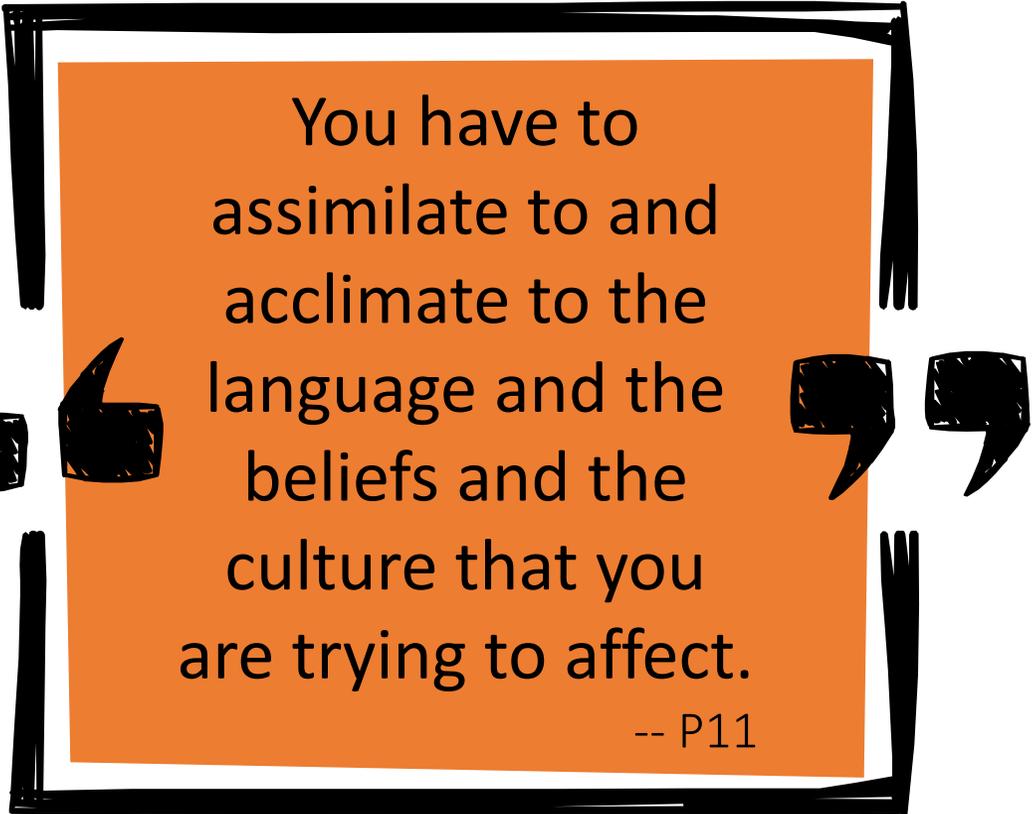
-- P07

Bridging the Gap: Translation & Context Awareness



Being able to translate complicated things very simply is crucial...

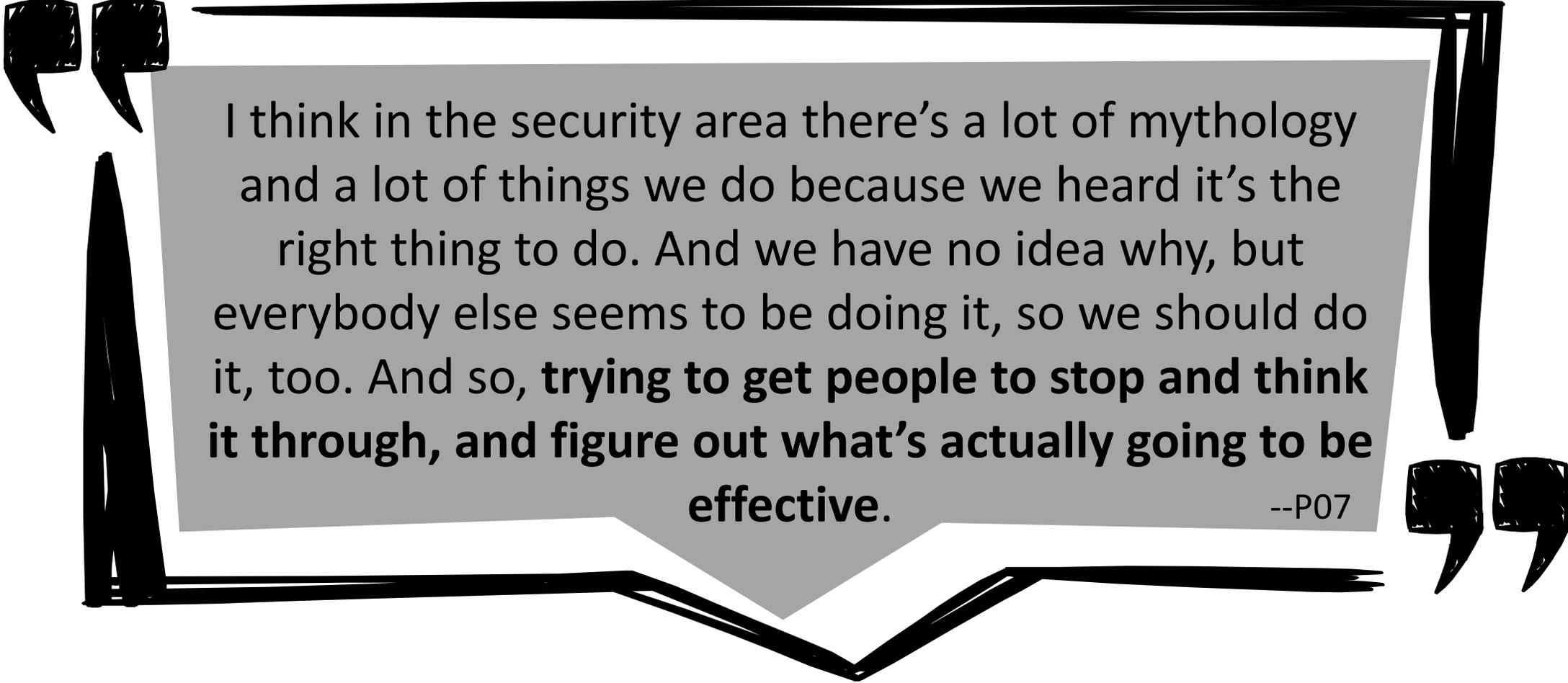
-- P02



You have to assimilate to and acclimate to the language and the beliefs and the culture that you are trying to affect.

-- P11

Providing Practical Recommendations



I think in the security area there's a lot of mythology and a lot of things we do because we heard it's the right thing to do. And we have no idea why, but everybody else seems to be doing it, so we should do it, too. And so, **trying to get people to stop and think it through, and figure out what's actually going to be effective.**

--P07

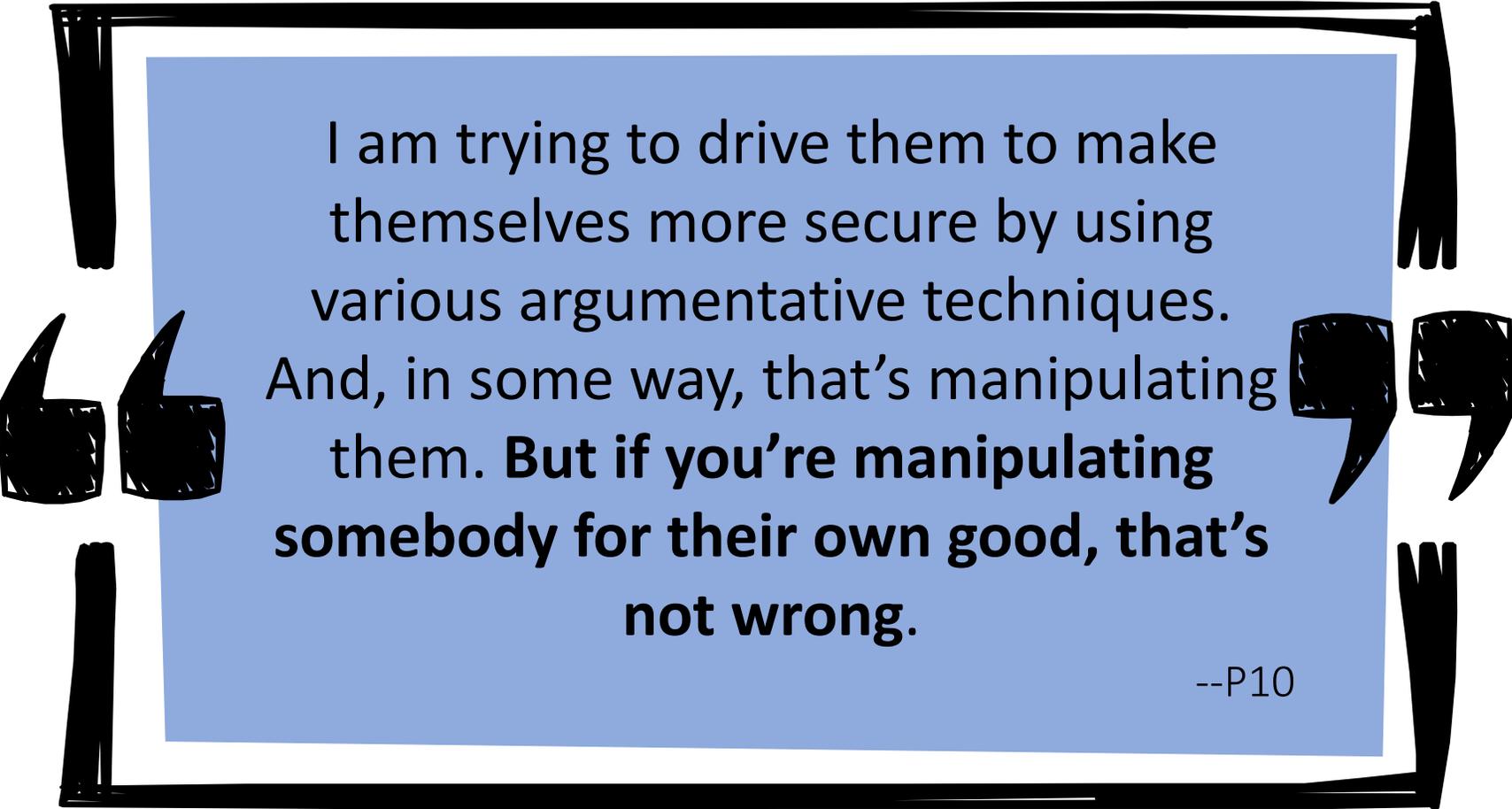
Overcoming “It’s Dull”



“ Nobody wants to spend their time doing security.”

-- P07

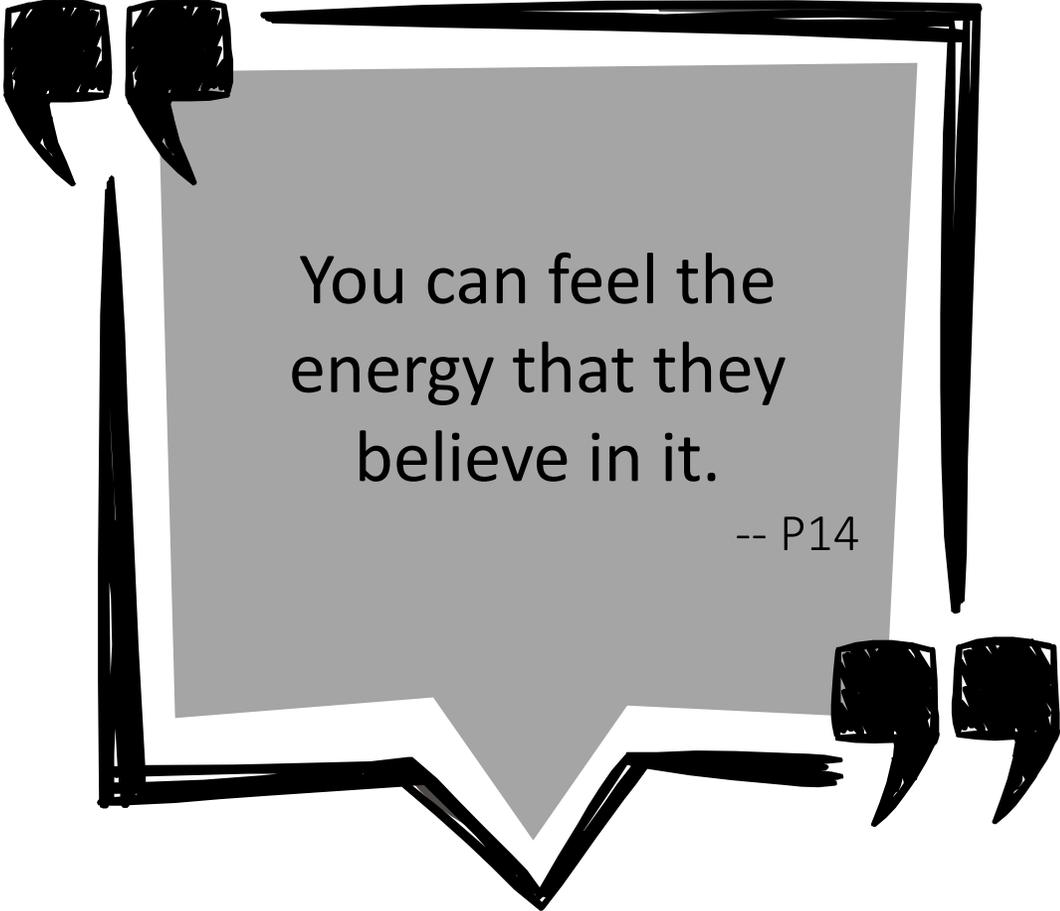
Incentivizing - Selling Security



I am trying to drive them to make themselves more secure by using various argumentative techniques. And, in some way, that's manipulating them. **But if you're manipulating somebody for their own good, that's not wrong.**

--P10

Using Engaging Communication Techniques



You can feel the energy that they believe in it.

-- P14



Personalizing the message is useful, seeing that this happens to real people.

-- P07

Implications

- Advancing risk communication
 - Relationship to non-security risk domains
 - Strategies for communicating security risk
- Emerging cybersecurity advocate role
 - Establishment of an advocate work role
 - Continuing education efforts to support progression from other roles and disciplines



Research Contribution Summary

- Identifies the cybersecurity advocate role
- Provides insight into security advocacy techniques in a variety of contexts, which can inform design of security resources
- Future: Validate interview findings with client interviews

Contact me: jhaney1@umbc.edu

