

The Uses (and Abuses) of Influence

ROBERT CIALDINI, considered the leading social scientist in the field of influence, was initially drawn to the topic because he saw how easily people could step over an ethical line into manipulation or even abuse. His 2001 book *Influence*, which laid out six principles of persuasion, was eloquent about the dangers of persuasive techniques in the wrong hands. A best-selling article he wrote for HBR the same year, “Harnessing the Science of Persuasion,” looked at the positive side of persuasion: how managers could use those principles to run their organizations more effectively.

Cialdini is the Regents’ Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Marketing at Arizona State University and the president of the consulting firm Influence at Work. In this edited interview with HBR executive editor Sarah Cliffe, he drills deeper into everyday uses of persuasion inside businesses and describes new research on the ethics of influence.



HBR: I'm going to run a few scenarios by you to explore how people can influence others more effectively at work. First, imagine that you're an employee trying to behave entrepreneurially. You need resources to jump-start a great business idea. How do you get people to help?

Cialdini: It requires prework. People will help if they owe you for something you did in the past to advance *their* goals. That's the rule of reciprocity.

Get in the habit of helping people out, and—this part's really important—don't wave it away when people thank you. Don't say, "Oh, no big deal." We're given serious persuasive power immediately after someone thanks us. So say something like "Of course; it's what partners do *for each other*"—label what happened an act of partnership. With that prework done, a manager who subsequently needs support, who needs staffing, who maybe even needs a budget, will have significantly elevated the probability of success.

Adam Grant's work on the importance of giving inside organizations echoes that, doesn't it?

It does. Grant provides a brilliant analysis. Another fascinating study was done by Frank Flynn, formerly at Columbia, now at Stanford. He examined giving behaviors at a large telecom and found that two things happened when people helped their colleagues. One, the helpers were perceived by their fellow employees to be extremely valuable. Two—and here's where it gets complicated—they had lower productivity on their own projects. They were diverting a lot of time and energy to their colleagues' problems.

How do you manage that discrepancy between generosity and productivity?

Flynn found one thing that increased both the social value of the giver *and* that person's productivity. It wasn't the number of favors done. It was the number of favors *exchanged*.

If the initial giver creates a sense of reciprocity—a sense that there's a network of partners who are not just willing but eager to help—he will get a lot in return. He can increase the likelihood of a big ROI by characterizing his assistance as a two-way partnership.

Second situation: An executive needs to convince a group that a big change in direction is necessary. What would you advise?

Moving people under conditions of uncertainty is difficult—the first thing they do is freeze. They're scared of what they might lose. Therefore, it's good to tell people what they will lose if they *fail* to move. Daniel Kahneman won a Nobel Prize for showing that if you're trying to mobilize people under conditions of uncertainty, notions of loss are psychologically more powerful than notions of gain. Managers can take the wind in their faces and make it wind in their sails by speaking not just of what will be gained by moving but also of what will be lost or forgone if people fail to move.

A second thing that happens when people are uncertain is that they don't look inside themselves for answers—all they see is ambiguity and their own lack of confidence. Instead, they look outside for sources of information that can reduce their uncertainty. The first thing they look to is authority: What do the experts think about this topic?

That's not necessarily the boss. It could be the person who knows the subject best.

That's an important distinction. We're not talking about being *in* authority but about being *an* authority. The manager needs to marshal evidence from acknowledged experts—they could be outsiders—that aligns with the rationale for the initiative.

The other place people look is to peers. If a couple of people are hanging back in a team meeting, the manager shouldn't hammer those guys, trying to get them to fall in line. Instead, he or she should identify

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The Six Principles of Persuasion

Persuasion works by appealing to certain deeply rooted human responses. Experiments in social psychology by Robert Cialdini and others have identified six of those responses, which Cialdini initially described in his book *Influence*.

Liking

If people like you—because they sense that you like them, or because of things you have in common—they're more apt to say yes to you.

Reciprocity

People tend to return favors. If you help people, they'll help you. If you behave in a certain way (cooperatively, for example), they'll respond in kind.

Social proof

People will do things they see other people doing—especially if those people seem similar to them.

Commitment and consistency

People want to be consistent, or at least to appear to be. If they make a public, voluntary commitment, they'll try to follow through.

Authority

People defer to experts and to those in positions of authority (and typically underestimate their tendency to do so).

Scarcity

People value things more if they perceive them to be scarce.

a respected member of the group who agrees with the plan and ask that person to weigh in. Peers are often more convincing than executives when we're deciding what we should do.

Here's another scenario. I was recently at a conference where a group of CEOs were asked to cooperate on a task that was important in a civic sense—important to the world—but was not necessarily something their shareholders would applaud. The organizer was deeply respected but had no formal power. In that kind of situation, how do you get people to make commitments that last beyond the feel-good moment?

Two things strike me as important. The first is something I'm thinking about right now for a book I'm writing: the power of *we*. When people see themselves as part of a larger group that has a shared identity, they are willing to take steps they wouldn't take

for their individual interests. The research on this is very clear. So the organizer needed to build that sense of shared purpose in the moment.

Once people disperse, they go back to their everyday *we*—in this case, the companies they run. So you need to lock in the change by getting people to make a public commitment while they're still together. You have to ask them what they will do and, if possible, get a written response.

Why does getting it in writing matter?

People live up to what they write down, for some reason; it seems to make the choice more conscious. They should also be asked to make commitments about next steps and to schedule another conversation, by which time they will be ready to describe the progress they've made. Bit by bit, the commitment becomes more concrete.

If you want to build up your informal networks, how do you go about it?

Here's where the internet helps us. We can find out a lot about people by checking their Facebook or LinkedIn pages. Look for things you have in common—maybe it's running, maybe it's knitting, maybe it's where you went to school. Finding something in common is powerful, because we like people who are like us; that's another principle of influence. If you use that similarity as a point of departure, and if you do it honestly, they'll like you, and you'll come to like them. Now you have people who are willing to be part of your network because of commonalities that were under the surface.

What advice can you give people who are reluctant to negotiate for themselves and need to get better at it? I'm thinking particularly about the research suggesting that women typically "don't ask."

I've done some work with Jeffrey Pfeffer, of Stanford, on whether you need someone to advance your case in a negotiation, and we've found that having an agent or advocate can be very helpful.

There are two benefits associated with having an agent when, say, you're being considered or recruited for a position. One is that you're perceived as more prestigious if someone is advocating for you. That's the authority principle in action.

The liking principle also comes into play. If you have to be a broker of information about yourself, you often appear self-aggrandizing, and it rubs people the wrong way. In the research we did, we found

that if an advocate for a candidate makes demands that are based on the candidate's merits, it doesn't harm the candidate. But if the candidate argues the very same case, it does. The people on the receiving end just don't like that person, who comes off as a braggart.

This is especially relevant for women. We have done research showing that women who are anything less than modest about their accomplishments are harmed interpersonally. Men can also do

human condition. The bad news is that their weights change from culture to culture.

In our research, we've found that in more collectivist, communal cultures, certain kinds of persuasive appeals are more successful. Social proof is very powerful. If a lot of your peers are doing something, that's a more powerful impetus for you than for people in more individualistic cultures, where one looks inside the self and doesn't use the group as the standard for deciding.

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themselves damage by being boastful, but we *expect* them to be aggressive. It hurts them far, far less than it hurts women.

Because of this bias, women will do better in organizations where managers are expected to advance the case for their people—where that's the cultural norm.

Any organization has minority groups—people who are “other” to some extent. Do they face difficulties when it comes to influencing those around them?

Yes, because of the similarity factor we talked about earlier. But there's a way around that. Those surface characteristics—race, ethnicity, foreign-born status—become irrelevant when there are commonalities in terms of values. We all want to work with people who share our sense of what's important—our priorities on the job, or even beyond the job. So one thing people can do is establish commonalities that aren't immediately visible. It usually takes a while for those things to be recognized; you can shorten the process by speaking about values more spontaneously.

So many businesses now are global—what kinds of difficulties do you run into cross-culturally with persuasion?

The good news is that the six principles of influence do seem to exist in all cultures. They're part of the

For example, we did a study in the U.S. and in Poland, which has a more communal orientation than the U.S. We asked individuals if they would be willing to participate in a marketing survey. We also asked them whether they had done that sort of thing in the past and whether they thought their friends had. In the U.S. the issue that best correlated with whether people would participate was whether they themselves had previously done so. That's the principle of consistency in action. In Poland it was whether they perceived that their friends had done that sort of thing in the past.

One of the clichés in Western management literature is that the command-and-control organization is dead. When we print something like that in HBR, I'm never sure if it rings true globally.

There's some evidence in that regard. Citibank asked its managers in various countries the following question: Suppose a fellow manager's project is suffering, and he or she asks for help. Responding will take time and energy, maybe even resources and staffing. Under what circumstances would you feel most compelled to help? In Hong Kong and in China the answer was “I would ask myself, Is the requester connected to a senior person in my group?” Out of fealty, you have to say yes to someone who is above you. In Spain the answer was “I would ask

myself, Is the requester connected to one of my friends?” There it’s not fealty; it’s loyalty. It’s the liking principle. You have to know those shifts in emphasis across cultures in order to optimize your effectiveness.

One thing that has changed since you did your original work on influence is the extent to which the internet and social media have taken over our lives. When you’re not in a face-to-face setting, how does influence change?

Social media have allowed us to access other sources of information than in the past, but I don’t think they’ve changed our responses to influence appeals. One thing we’re seeing, though, is that people are beginning to be influenced by their peers more than by experts.

If you look at TripAdvisor or Yelp, you find that it’s not travel writers or restaurant critics who are influencing others’ choices. It’s people just like you and me, who can now report on their experiences.

That peer-influence effect reminds me of the work you’ve done on how hotels influence guests to reuse towels. Making an environmental argument was powerful, but what *really* moved the needle was hearing about the number of other guests who reused their towels.

Yes, and in follow-up studies we found that the most successful message was not the one that said the majority of people who’ve stayed in this hotel reused their towels. It was the one that said the majority of people who’ve stayed *in this room* reused their towels.

That’s such an odd finding.

Isn’t it? But one thing I’ve learned is that the most primitive techniques of influence are the most powerful ones. By “primitive,” I don’t mean anything derogatory. It’s just clear that the more localized and personalized we can make a source of information, the more likely it is to move people in our direction.

What emerging themes in the field interest you?

One important issue is the durability of the change we create. The research typically hasn’t looked at that. However, along with a company called Opower, we’re now in our fourth year of giving people access to information about their neighbors’ patterns of energy usage, and the latest study indicates that people continue to pay attention to that information and to

adjust their own usage accordingly. We have to give people a reason to pay attention—in this case, it’s evidence about what their neighbors are doing—so that their commitments will endure.

The other issue I’ve gotten interested in is the ethics of influence, which we haven’t examined in a rigorous, scientific way. What are the consequences of being ethical or unethical? Of course, we know that a person’s reputation—and her ability to influence—suffer damage if she is discovered to have been unethical, especially inside an organization. However, that fact doesn’t necessarily constrain less-than-ethical behavior. Here’s why: People don’t expect to be found out. Especially at the highest levels of power, people feel that they’re bulletproof.

So we’re approaching ethics from another, more self-interested, angle: Is there a bottom-line argument for being scrupulously ethical in the way you deal with customers, clients, vendors, regulators, and so on? Our hypothesis is that if an organization allows or cultivates a culture of dishonesty with the world outside the firm, the people inside the organization who are uncomfortable with dishonesty will seek to leave, and they will remain uncomfortable and stressed until they do. Conversely, the people who are comfortable with dishonesty will stay. Eventually the organization will be full of people who are comfortable with cheating—and who will cheat the organization.

Along with Adriana Samper [of Arizona State University] and Jessica Li [of the University of Kansas], I’ve done some experimental work to test this hypothesis. First we set up project teams and gave some members reason to believe that their fellow team members had conspired to cheat. When those witnesses were then given a difficult problem to solve, they performed significantly worse than people who hadn’t been exposed to cheating. They were stressed. They were preoccupied to the point where it affected their performance. In a related experiment, people who, when given a choice, were comfortable working with a dishonest team cheated 50% more often than anyone else did.

These are early data, but we suspect this is a decent proxy for what will happen inside an organization over time. If an organization chooses to be unethical with clients or suppliers, it will ultimately be cheated by people who are happy to work in a dishonest culture. Eventually the organization will pay for it on the bottom line. Count on it. ♥

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