Three evidence-based ways to boost influence at work

As the way of working shifts permanently to more remote methods of communicating, sharpening and widening your skillset to influence your CEO, colleagues, management team, external partners, and the public has grown even more crucial.

In a world of flattened hierarchies and globe-spanning teams, influencing know-how is fundamental not only for management and leadership roles, but extends into just about any business unit at every level, to effect change, build consensus around a major project, or unite people behind a new initiative in these uncertain yet promising times.

During the past decade, influencing has become the study of behavioural science, and its influencing techniques are now effectively used by a range of companies, especially online and in social media. As a result, evidence is accumulating on which techniques can boost influence. Today, there are some 600 behavioural science research units spanning the globe, in fields as wide-ranging as government, law, business, medicine and education. One of the most renowned of these is the Behavioural Insights Team inside the UK government.

One of the leading behavioural scientists who has studied the science of influence is Robert Cialdini, a Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Arizona State University, widely known for his best-selling book, Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion, which is regularly updated as the research findings and body of practice on influence continue to expand. Cialdini has identified seven levers of influence. Three of these are presented here.

Influencer Rule #1: Reciprocity

According to sociologists and anthropologists, one of the basic norms of human culture is embodied in the rule of reciprocation. This sense of future obligation makes possible the development of various kinds of ongoing relationships, transactions, and exchanges that are beneficial.

Reciprocity can prompt sizeable changes in behaviours. The rule of reciprocity states that we should try to pay back what another person has given us. A research study conducted in the UK bears this out. Investment bankers who were approached as they arrived at the office were asked to donate a full days' salary – and those who were given a packet of sweets with this fundraising pitch doubled their contribution.

One of the ways reciprocity can be made even more effective is to bring about a mutual set of concessions. So if you want someone to agree to a certain request, one way to increase the chances the person will comply is if you first make a larger request, which is likely to be turned down. Then after the refusal, you make the smaller request that you were interested in all along. The second request would be seen as a concession and would make the person inclined to respond with a concession in turn – acceptance of the second request.

Influencer Rule #2: Commitment Coupled With Consistency

Psychologists have long recognized the desire in people to be and look consistent with their words, beliefs, attitudes and deeds.

Social psychologists understand how consistency guides human action: commitment. Once we take a position, there is an inclination to behave in ways that line up with that stand. This principle is based on the belief we have of the greater validity of a choice after a hard selection has been made. For example, voters believe more strongly in their choice right after casting their ballot.

Skilful politicians deploy the committing of labels to their benefit.

Cialdini in his recent book tells the story of former Egyptian President, Anwar Sadat, and what he would say before the start of an international negotiation. He would tell his bargaining opponents that they were widely recognized for their fair dealings and spirit of cooperation. Diplomats said Sadat was successful because he got others to act in his interests by starting the talks by giving them a reputation to live up to.

Getting an initial commitment is key. After making a commitment, we are more willing to agree to requests in keeping with the prior commitment.

Research bears out that commitments are most effective when they are active, public, effortful, and viewed as voluntary because each of these elements alters self-image.

Influencer Rule #3: Authority

A credible authority possesses two distinct features in the minds of an audience – expertise and trustworthiness.

In a recent study, the CEO of a bank sent a personalized letter to bankers asking them to donate to a charity campaign which generated the highest compliance rate of the methods studied. The letter demonstrated the effectiveness of combining two kinds of authority – a high-placed authority and a personalized message - since the CEO would know whether they complied.

Other research on authority has shown the powerful professional authority.

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A therapist's office that displays multiple diplomas and professional certifications on the wall produces higher ratings not only of the therapist's proficiency, but also of his or her kindness, friendliness, and interest in clients.

A communicator can also be quickly viewed as trustworthy by referencing a weakness early on in discussing a case study. By doing so, you will be seen as more honest. When the major strengths of the case are then presented, the audience will be more likely to believe them.

For example, Warren Buffett, the CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, in the beginning of the company's annual report, usually details a mistake he made or a problem the company faced in the past year, and then explores the possible future consequences.

Influencing involves the systematic use of a well-designed strategy, whether you are aiming to influence one individual, a team, a whole organization, or the public at large. It means using superb communications skills and harnessing the latest methods. Great influencers seem effortless and their presentation skills also appear seamless. It is not overdone or stage-managed but rather through carrying out a well-thought-out plan that is presented naturally, which capitalizes on an evidence-based influencer skillset.