

The Principles of Persuasion

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Robert B. Cialdini, Ph.D., president of Influence at Work, has an international reputation as an expert in persuasion, compliance and negotiation. His books, "Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion" and "Influence: Science and Practice," have sold more than 500,000 copies in 12 languages. In the field of influence and persuasion, Cialdini is the most cited social psychologist in the world. His clients include national organizations and government groups. A Regent's Professor of psychology at Arizona State University, Cialdini was named Distinguished Graduate Research Professor New Information Presentations.

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I want to talk about the influence process, the process of persuading people to come into line with the requests and the offers that we make of them; but I want to do it in a way that requires that we change nothing at all about what it is we are presenting to people what it is that we are offering people what it is that we are proposing to people. The process of persuasion works by changing how we present what it is that we have to offer and that we have to propose to people. When I do a program like this in a much smaller venue with much more time available, typically I'll go around the room and ask people what they want to get from our time together, what they really want to take away from the time that we spend. Almost invariably I'll hear at least one person who says something like this, "I'm interested in the influence process, how persuasion works, the theory of it the underlying factors that cause people to move in our direction. I'm interested in all of those things; but what I really want from you is one thing that I can take back to my office next week and begin using to become more influential, to become more effective in my persuasive communications, to get people to say 'yes' significantly more often."

I'm going to do better than that. I'm going to give you four things right now four things right now that I'll guarantee if you begin implementing into the way you present what it is you have to offer, you will become significantly more effective in getting people to say "yes" to those very same things. I'll give you those four things in terms of the answers to four questions I'll pose right now.

First: is it better to tell prospects and clients what they stand to gain by deciding in your direction or what they stand to lose if they don't? How many people here would say go with the positive, tell them about the gains, tell them what they should gain? How many people would say no tell them what they might lose? If you looked around, you would see it was about a fifty-fifty split. I'll tell you the answer to this isn't even close; it's one of those things and not the other and we will cover that.

Second: if you have a product, a service, an idea, a recommendation that has both strengths and weaknesses (and let's be honest, what doesn't have both strengths and

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weaknesses) should you present the weaknesses early in your presentation or late after you developed the strengths? There is a clear answer to that one, we'll get to it.

Third: after someone has praised you, your service, your organization for your efforts, what is the most successful, influential, effective thing you can say after they've said "thank you"? In the course of social interaction, there are particular windows of opportunity when, if you make a request in that moment, you will be significantly more successful than if you jump the gun too soon or if you wait and the window closes. You are given a moment of power immediately after someone has thanked you. what do you do with that moment? We'll cover that.

Fourth: to arrange for someone to like you and want to cooperate with you, what is the single most effective thing you can do? There are a lot of things we can do to create rapport, but there is one thing that out performs all the others and we'll cover that.

The answers to these questions come from 50 years of research into the psychology of influence and persuasion. Over a half a century now, researchers have been studying what inclines people, what motivates them to say "yes" to a request. I want to take that 50 years and summarize for you what we have found as scientists of the social influence process. My own research suggests there are just six universal principles of influence that, if you incorporate one or another of these principles into a request, you significantly increase the likelihood of "yes" to that request.

The first one is the principle of reciprocation that applies in every human culture. I know that this organization has members in 76 countries. There is not a single country on this earth, there is not a single human society, there is not a single culture that doesn't train its members from childhood in the rule for reciprocation which says "I am obligated to give back to you what you first give to me. If you invite me to a party, I should invite you to one of mine; if you remember my birthday with a gift, I should remember yours and if you do me a favor, I owe you a favor." This is taught from childhood: you must not take without giving in return. In every human culture, in

every language, we have very nasty names for people who take without giving in return, don't we? In English, we'll call them freeloaders or takers or ingrates or teenagers and nobody wants to be labeled like that. We will go to great lengths to give back when we have received. Do you see the implications for you and your business? When you go into a situation where you want to be more influential, you should not look around and ask who can help you. No, your first question should be whom can you help, whose business circumstances can you advance and how can you do it. That will cause everybody in that situation whom you have first served to want to help you in return.

This applies across all cultures; let me give you an example. Several years ago I read a newspaper article that described a gift of humanitarian aid sent between the countries of Mexico on the one hand and Ethiopia on the other. At that time, Ethiopia could fairly lay claim to the greatest misery and suffering and privation in the world so it didn't surprise me that thousands of dollars were being sent between these two countries. It shocked me though when I read further into the article to learn the money hadn't gone from Mexico to Ethiopia; it had gone from Ethiopia to Mexico to help the victims of the Mexico City earthquakes that year. This country, whose population was dying by the day because of hunger and thirst and privation, sent thousands of dollars away from their own people to Mexico. How could this be? The reporter went to the Ethiopian official who commissioned this gift and asked him why he did it. He said in 1935, when they were at war with Italy, Mexico helped them. Transcending the greatest misery and suffering in the world, the rule for reciprocation out performs all of those other features. Hook this into your request strategies: if you give first, they will want to give in return

How many times have you heard somebody say "thank you" after you have gone to great lengths to produce efforts and service above and beyond the call of duty? What do you say in that moment? A few years ago I was speaking overseas I was in Australia speaking to a large group about this rule for reciprocation and how it's so powerful and people want to give back when they've received. As I

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talked about this, a man in the second row began to change physically; his face got pale, his hands started to shake. I thought he was ill so I stopped and said, “excuse me, sir, are you all right?” He said, “yes, but I just realized something I never understood before. I own a software company here in Sydney but a few years ago our major customer, located in Melbourne, called to say they were having a problem with our software. Not only did I send our top technician to fix it, I sent our two top technicians and I went along with them to be sure that this problem was dispatched immediately. It turned out to be relatively minor; we had it fixed in the course of a morning. I was sitting in the IT director’s office that afternoon and she said to me, ‘thank you, I really appreciate what you did. You showed me something above and beyond the call of duty, thank you.’” He said, “Do you know what I heard come out of my mouth in that moment of triumph, in that moment when the rule for reciprocation is active? I said, ‘oh, don’t think anything of it; it was no big deal; it was just part of the job we’d do it for anybody.’” Does this echo at all in anybody’s ears? Right then where he had deserved the leverage that the influence process entitles him, he took the rule of reciprocation and he smacked it with the back of his hand right out the window. What he should have said in that moment is, “Of course we were glad to help. It’s what long term partners do for one another for one another.” The rule of exchange has to be implemented then and there. If there wasn’t a long term partnership, say in return, “Of course I was glad to do it, I know you’d do the same for me.” You’re entitled to that moment.

The next principle of influence is the principle of scarcity. People want more of what they can have less of. What’s the implication for you? Before you ever try to influence people, tell them how what you have to offer is unique, is uncommon, is rare. They can’t get it if they don’t move in the direction you are recommending. Secondly, when you describe these unique, uncommon features of what your organization can offer, don’t be content to tell them what they will stand to gain if they do move in your direction; you need to also tell them what they will stand to lose if they don’t because the evidence is very clear

now: people are more mobilized to action by the idea of losing something than of gaining that very same thing. Let me give you an example. I work with a company here in the United States, Bose Acoustics, very high end acoustic manufacturer with terrific products. They have a new product - the new improved Bose wave radio system. It’s a terrific product and all of their ads have been describing this new product. At the top of the ad, it says “new: new performance, new reliability, new features.” That ad has been under performing their expectations significantly. We’ve changed five words in that ad now to take into account the power of loss language. The ad no longer reads “new” at the top; it reads “hear what you have been missing.” In every market where that ad has been offered, sales have gone up 45% for five words. What I’m offering with the persuasion process is a way to create enormous change within your organizations that is costless; you just change the words that you use. You don’t have to change your products or services, you don’t have to change your personnel, you don’t have to change your business model, you don’t have to change anything; you change the words you use and you can produce enormous effects because the words get hooked into central features of the psychology of the people that you’re dealing with.

The next principle of influence is the principle of authority. People want to follow legitimate experts. Before you ever try to influence someone in your direction, you need to share with them your level of expertise on the topic. They don’t have a crystal ball, they can’t know that about you until you presented it. It sounds simple. You’d be surprised how many people forget to do that or are embarrassed to do it because it seems boastful so here is what I’m going to recommend. Instead of you presenting this information about yourself, have someone who knows your new prospect call that person and tell them about you. And, by the way, when do you ask that person to make the call for you? In the moment after “thank you.”

The most powerful kinds of authority are not just the ones who are most credentialed, who have the greatest competence because research around the world - in Japan, in Sweden, in the United Kingdom and the United States

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- all says the same thing: it's not enough to be knowledgeable in order to be effective, you also have to be trustworthy. People must perceive this expert information you are providing as honest. How do you convey that message to people that you are truly honest with them when they don't have a track record with you? There's a strategy that works, that's been developed by the advertising industry because they are forever in the position of having to take new products and services and bring them into markets that have no experience with them. Before they present the strongest argument in favor of their position, they mention a weakness in their position; that establishes them as both knowledgeable and honest. Remember I said there was a moment of power that you are afforded immediately after someone says thank you; there is also a different moment of power immediately after you admit a weakness. After you have admitted a weakness, you say, "but..." and then you deliver your strongest argument. People listen differently, they open their ears to it; they open their minds to it. Let me give you a couple of examples from the advertising world. "Avis, we're number two..." Can you finish that? "but we try harder." That's what they want you to listen to. "L'Oreal, we're expensive ..." Can you finish that? "but you're worth it." First comes the weakness followed by the thing they want you to listen to. Those two ads were among the top of all time in the United States.

The next principal for us to consider is the principle of commitment and consistency. One way I can increase the likelihood that you will say "yes" to a request is to first to get you to take a small step, a commitment, a small commitment that's logically consistent with where I'm going to ask you to move later. The best commitment I know is a written commitment. People live up to what they write down. When you go to the dentist or the doctor and the receptionist gives you an appointment card for the next appointment, if she fills out the card you are significantly less likely to show up at the next appointment then

if you fill out the card. Get people to write down even the most preliminary agreements you have with them. They will live up to those.

The next principal is the principle of consensus. We decide what we should do in a situation by looking at what others like us do in that situation. I just finished a research study on hotels. In most hotels, somewhere in the room there is a card asking you to recycle your towels and linen. What can you say on the card that significantly increases the likelihood that people will do that? Here's what we put on the card that produced a 20% increase. "Of the people who have stayed in this hotel, the majority of our guests have recycled their towels." We got a 25% increase if we said, "the majority of people who've stayed in this room have recycled their towels." All of the people who refer to you and you have available, use those individuals to be the communicators for your products and services. Use those letters, those testimonials and provide the ones that are most similar to the individuals you are trying to persuade. Those are the ones they're going to listen to, not the biggest successes that you had rather the ones that are most similar to them.

Here is the last principle one that won't surprise you at all. It's the principal of liking. We prefer to say "yes" to those people we like. Here are the things that cause us to like people and for them to like us: similarities; we like people who are similar to us, and compliments; we like people who do like us and say so. If you find real similarities between yourself and the people that you're dealing with, uncover genuinely admirable features of those people and tell them about it. Not only will they come to like you, here's the most important thing, you will come to like them. In the complicated environment of financial services, people want a counselor, an advocate who likes them. That's where they feel safe. Your job is not to get people to like you as much as it is to come to like the people you're dealing with and then you have two people who like each other. You can't do better than that in the business world.