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Harness the power of persuasion

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BY THE GAZETTE (MONTREAL) FEBRUARY 17, 2007

If you want to influence people, don't tell them who's boss. "You know from experience that if you try to persuade using your positional power, most of the time it will backfire on you," said training and development consultant Heath Slawner.

And even if you can get someone to do what you want because "you're the boss," they'll either quit doing it when you're not around or they won't innovate or ask questions.

That's human nature.

So it's imperative, in order to bring your own agenda forward, that you find ways to persuade the other person to move in your direction, even if it means changing their own direction in order to do so.

It was at a juncture in his career - the Wharton School graduate had left film marketing and production in Los Angeles to return to Montreal - that Slawner learned about the work of social psychologist Robert Cialdini.

"He was looking at what can we learn from science when it comes to influencing other people, about what causes people to say yes to someone's request," Slawner said.

He realized that his clients - including Merck Frosst, the United Nations and Reader's Digest, at Hart Resource Development, where he was a trainer and consultant - would benefit from learning the techniques of persuasion.

So Slawner became the first trainer in Canada formally certified in the Principles of Persuasion, a workshop in Cialdini's method. He offers training workshops as well as keynote presentations.

"It's pretty intellectual stuff, with a lot of nuance to it," he said. "People are using these principles all the time; it's just a matter of understanding them, and the biases we have as human beings."

The six principles Cialdini proposes are not mutually exclusive - it depends on the situation as to which principle or principles are to be used. Each one is based on human behaviour, elaborated in countless studies.

The first one is reciprocity.

"It tells us that people feel obligated to give back to those who have given to them," Slawner said.

This is a deceptively simple principle, with some interesting applications, based on the notion that if you're the first person to give, you stand a better chance of getting back.

This mindset works in all kinds of situations.

Take networking, Slawner says, which can be tedious and feel so contrived. But if you go into a networking situation not thinking what it can do for you but what you can do for someone else, all kinds of situations open up.

Or, consider that when you want to make a request, the order in which you make it can have a major impact on whether you will get it or not.

"As human beings we don't want to hear the word 'no,'" Slawner said.

The strategy is to start off with a bigger request, the one that is more likely to receive a negative answer. Then, when you move to a smaller request, you're more likely to get what you want.

There is an important caveat, which is that you don't make things up in order to act strategically.

"The key is all of this needs to be done ethically; in applying the principles, it's extremely important," Slawner said.

The next principle is consensus, which tells us that when people are unsure what to do, they look to what others in similar situations are doing. We should never underestimate the guiding role that others play in our choices, Slawner says.

Like in business, when testimonials work as a way of assuring a new client, you try to influence someone in the workplace by letting them know what similar people are doing.

And make it positive, he says.

"Don't say: 'These six people haven't done this.' But that, 'These nine people have.' You want to normalize the behaviour you're seeking from other people and you do this by using consensus information."

Another principle is authority, because when people are unsure what to do, they often defer to legitimate experts, Slawner says. This becomes persuasive information in an argument.

"Of course, it depends on who your target sees as an expert; and it's all the better if you can position yourself as one."

Consistency is the fourth principle.

"Nobody wakes up in the morning looking to be erratic. We have a preference to align with our commitments," he said.

Let's say you want your company to adopt a course of action. If you can align your request with the company's values, you're going to make it harder for that company to say no to you.

"What we find is that values are one of the strongest ways you can influence someone," Slawner said. "It's not about changing your request, it's just about the way you make the request. Our challenge is understanding what it is that people hold important."

The next principle is scarcity.

This, too, is deceptively simple: people want more of what they think is scarce. They're afraid to lose out on opportunities.

So you can position your request by talking about what people stand to lose and make sure you use any new information at your disposal to make your case.

Information is an important tool, Slawner says, and describes it more like a bagel than wine. Rather than letting it age, you want it fresh and hot.

"If you have exclusive information, you've got something that is scarce and people will value it more highly because it's new and fresh. So you should share it right away," he said.

"And you may start to see how sharing information is a way you can invoke reciprocity."

The last principle is liking, which means that people prefer to say yes to someone they have a rapport or connections with - someone they know and like.

These principles apply in all types of business activities, from fundraising to leadership and coaching, Slawner said.

What it means is understanding that human beings have certain biases, and what activates their decision-making processes can have a deep impact on your results and your relationships.

Ignore this at your peril.

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It's a lot easier if you get along

You don't get along with one of your colleagues or, worse still, your boss?

There are ways to get along with someone, says training consultant Heath Slawner. Think of the outcome - that's it's better for everyone if you get along - and you'll feel less like you're giving up your principles.

The first factor that affects liking is similarity. Salesmen - think of the used car variety - use this technique all the time when they spot a tennis bag or gym bag in your car and start a conversation about their tennis or gym habits. They're trying to invoke similarity, which is a positive message to their potential client.

The second is offering praise. "Too often we're conservative when someone does something," Slawner said.

Once again, ethics rule, but it does make a difference to think about someone else's feelings and give

some positive feedback.

Remember the adage: Do something good for somebody, they will tell three people. Do something bad, they'll tell nine people.

Third, find ways to co-operate with someone. That behaviour will often have the positive effect of bringing up the reciprocity principle.

"It's not so much that you should be likeable," Slawner said. "What's more important is that you genuinely like the people you're trying to influence."

"Try to find something about that person to like - even someone who rubs you the wrong way."

The six principles of persuasion

Reciprocity: People feel obligated to give back to those who have given to them.

Consensus: When unsure of what to do, people tend to follow the lead of others in similar situations.

Authority: We defer to legitimate experts.

Consistency: People prefer to align with their commitments, beliefs and values.

Scarcity: People want more of what they can have less of.

Liking: We prefer to say yes to those we know and like.

Based on the research of Dr. Robert Cialdini, president of Influence At Work, author of *Influence: Science and Practice* and *Influence: the Psychology of Persuasion*.

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