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NEGOTIATION DYNAMICS

Everybody's Doing It

How to leverage the power of social proof—evidence from the environment about the "right" way to behave—to influence the outcome of a negotiation.

BY ROBERT B. CIALDINI

BROWN UNIVERSITY MEDICAL SCHOOL researchers recently conducted a fascinating study on the factors that influence adolescents to take up cigarette smoking. As expected, several personal, familial, and social circumstances were to blame. For instance, teens who had been delinquent or suffered depression were 14% more likely to become smokers than those without such histories, and teens with a parent who smoked were 26% more likely to take up smoking themselves. No surprises there. More notable is the dramatic impact of *peers* on the decision to smoke regularly. Among teens who had two friends with the habit, cigarette smoking increased by 1,000%, and rose by a staggering 2,400% among those with at least three friends who smoked!

The Brown study dramatically illustrates the potency of *social proof*—evidence from our social environment about the "right" way to behave. One fundamental way that people decide how to act in a negotiation, or in any situation, is to look at how others have behaved in similar circumstances. Other people's responses help us identify paths we might choose to take. By following the lead of others, we can make quicker, more efficient decisions about how to act. If all of your colleagues are raving about a new piece of software, a new movie, or a new restaurant, chances are good that you'll like it, too.

The findings of the Brown study are sobering, yet instructive for those of us who seek more influence in our professional roles. Indeed, the study illustrates perfectly three factors that have emerged from years of research into what makes all decision makers—not just teenagers— likely to follow the lead of others: uncertainty, popularity, and similarity.

Uncertainty

Teens are hardly alone in their susceptibility to peer pressure. In general, when we find ourselves in an unfamiliar situation, all of us will look outside ourselves for evidence of how to behave. Uncertainty motivates us to study the actions of others for information that will guide our own behavior. It stands to reason: if we look inside ourselves and find only murky uncertainty, we'll be primed to take the lead from someone who's been there, done that.

How does uncertainty affect influence attempts on the job? As a negotiator and manager, you must be aware of the conditions that stimulate uncertainty in those whom you seek to influence. And when the conditions are right, you'll need to make a special effort to marshal social proof for the steps you're advocating. When proposing an entirely new element to an existing arrangement or contract, for instance, the savvy negotiator will recognize her bargaining opponent's lack of familiarity with the novel feature and come prepared with evidence—survey results, testimonials, statistics—of its success with others.

Similarly, when negotiating new job responsibilities with an employee, a wise manager will go beyond the usual appeals to the best interests of the employee and the organization. He'll also respond to the employee's uncertainties with appropriate social proof for the recommended change, such as accounts of others' willingness to be reassigned in the past.

Popularity

In the Brown smoking study, did you notice that that one big influence on teens' decision to smoke was the *number* of friends they had who smoked? Having three or more friends with the habit more than doubled the impact of having only two such friends. This outcome highlights the second factor that maximizes the power of social proof: popularity. As the number of individuals who undertake an action increases, so does the number of observers who will follow suit.

If you're skeptical, try this simple experiment. Stand on a busy sidewalk, pick an empty spot in the sky or on a tall building, and stare at it for a full minute. Odds are, nothing out of the ordinary will happen; most people will walk by you without glancing up, and virtually no one will stop to stare with you.

The next day, go to the same place and bring along four friends. After you've all stared skyward at the same spot for a

minute, you'll probably find that a crowd of passersby has stopped to crane their necks along with you. Not every pedestrian will join in the group stare, but the pressure to look up at least briefly will be nearly irresistible. If the results of your experiment match those of a famous study by Stanley Milgram, Leonard Bickman, and Lawrence Berkowitz, you and your friends will cause 80% of all passersby to direct their gaze to your empty spot.

There's a strong human tendency to think that any activity must have value if a lot of people are engaged in it— whether it's smoking, staring, or accepting an intriguing offer at the bargaining table.

Consider this accidental lesson on the power of popularity. Colleen Szot is the author of some of the most successful infomercials of all time, including one for a NordicTrac exerciser—a large, expensive piece of workout equipment that you might have yourself in an attic or storeroom somewhere. That infomercial moved 360,000 units in the first month of sales!

Clearly, Szot knows how to get people to respond in a big way. But even she was amazed by the stunning effect of a minor alteration to the standard call-to-action line that appears in nearly every infomercial: "Operators are waiting, please call now." She changed just three words so that the new line read, "If operators are busy, please call again."

Calls went through the roof. Why?

Think of the different images the tag lines inspire. "Operators are waiting" conjures a picture of people twiddling their thumbs and filing their nails. "Operators are busy," on the other hand, creates the impression of popularity— and resounding social proof. "If everyone else wants it," viewers think, "it *must* be good."

When you have ample social proof on your side, it would be a shame to fumble it away. During a negotiation, don't rely solely on your own powers of persuasion to get someone to move in your direction. If you've got the consensus of opinion on your side, chart the numbers and present lists of your supporters. This last practice—handing over lists of names—can be especially effective, as it offers your influence target personalized, documented social proof of the wisdom of your stand.

Similarity

A last look at the Brown smoking study points us to the final factor that optimizes the impact of social proof on negotiation: similarity. Although their parents' smoking habits had some effect on the teens' own decisions to smoke (a 26% increase), the greatest impact by far was the conduct of their friends (a 1,000% increase for those with two smoking friends and a 2,400% increase for those with three or more).

The evidence from social science is clear: people's behavior is powerfully influenced by the actions of those who are like them. A classic study by Harvey Hornstein, Elisha Fisch, and Michael Holmes found that New York City residents were highly likely to return a lost wallet after learning that a "similar other"—another New Yorker—had first tried to do so. But evidence that a dissimilar other—a foreigner —had tried to return the wallet did not increase the likelihood that they would try. When people are trying to determine how to act, they pay attention to how others like them behave in the same situation.

Negotiators who overlook the value of similarity in influencing decision making can rely on the wrong individuals to deliver important messages. One common mistake is to take sole responsibility for communicating the wisdom of a particular policy or the need for change. By taking on the sole burden of persuasion, negotiators give too much credit to their position in the organizational hierarchy or their own powers of influence.

The most effective communicators recognize when they are *not* the most effective communicators. Specifically, they know that the best route to influence can be from the side rather than from above. For influence practitioners, this means allowing individuals who haven't yet changed in the desired direction to hear from those who have. Even one exposure to the favorable positions of peers on a topic can have more impact than multiple exposures to the same position from a negotiation opponent or a supervisor.

Both inside and outside the organizational envelope, then, the same principle applies: persuading one individual by providing evidence that some very different others have done so can be a big waste of time.

A related point: when working to ensure that the voices of supportive individuals will be heard, leaders should give greatest priority to those who are most similar in circumstances to the still-unconvinced. Imagine that resistance to a beneficial change is strongest among the longest-employed members of a department. This group is most likely to be influenced by a fellow old-timer who has genuinely embraced the rationale for change. Therefore, leaders would be well advised to resist the temptation to encourage a newer (although more articulate) member of the group to speak up instead. Canny sales managers teach a version of this lesson to their troops by coaching them to use testimonials from satisfied customers who share a similar business background with new prospects.

Now that you know where to look, you'll find that the keys to successful bargaining are often right there in front of you. Once you spot them, it isn't difficult to put them to good use. When uncertainty, popularity, and similarity are all present in a negotiation, you're in an enviable position to influence the outcome in your favor. .

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"Gee, Tommy, I'd be lost without your constant peer pressure."