

THIS MONTH

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LAST GASP**NEW** THE SCIENCE OF PERSUASION
UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Every day we face the challenge of persuading others to do what we want, whether it's getting your colleagues to agree with you or your partner to put the kettle on. In the first of a new series uncovering the secret science of persuasion, **Steve Martin** offers his top tips to help managers encourage their teams to change



Staff are more likely to change if it means being in step with others

Transformation, modification, revolution, evolution, or simply progress... organisations use a huge variety of words to describe change. Understandable, considering that how an initiative or project is presented to staff is a key factor in its success. But even more important is the way leaders and managers influence and persuade their colleagues and staff to embrace, commit to, and carry out the desired changes.

In a world of inter-company partnerships, cross-functional teams and highly individualised workforces, playing the 'do it because I'm the boss' card is no longer an option. In the changing world of business, persuasion now exerts a greater force over others than formalised structures or force itself. But if the ability to influence and persuade others is such a critical skill in bringing about change, what is actually known about how the influence process works?

RULES OF REACTION

For almost 60 years, social scientists have been studying how people are persuaded, and something startling has emerged from this research. They discovered that there are certain universal laws guiding human decision making across the board – which is good news for leaders and managers. No longer do we have to trust to chance that our strategies will be effective, no more trial and error approaches when we want to convince others. In a world where we are all becoming increasingly overwhelmed with information, these universal principles of persuasion are the shortcuts that people typically use to decide on the right course of action.

By understanding these scientific principles of influence, which appeal to just six deep-rooted human needs, managers and leaders' requests, proposals and initiatives for change stand a greater chance of success.

There are six universal principles

of persuasion: reciprocity – we feel obligated to, and are persuaded more by, those who have done something for us first; authority – we look to legitimate experts to help us make the right decisions; commitment and consistency – we want our actions to be consistent with our values and are more persuaded by requests that align to our commitments; liking – the more we like people, the more we want to say yes to them; scarcity – the less available the resource, the more we want it, especially when we stand to lose something; and social proof – we look to what others around us are doing to guide our actions.

It's this last principle, social proof, which could provide managers with an especially powerful tool for effective change. Our research shows that in situations of uncertainty – and organisational change is a classic example of uncertainty – people are especially likely to follow the lead of similar others around them.

By way of an example, consider a study conducted by a team of researchers that included my two co-authors of *Yes!*, Professor Robert Cialdini and Professor Noah Goldstein. They found that few families get feedback about whether the energy they use in their homes is comparable to families like theirs in similar sized homes. So, they decided to help by recording the weekly energy use of over 300 households to see how much energy they consumed per week. A small card was then hung on the front door of each household that gave feedback to the homeowners about how their energy consumption compared to the neighbourhood average. What was fascinating was the influence these cards had on those households who had been consuming more energy than their neighbours – they quickly reduced their energy consumption to fall in line with their comparable neighbours. What is especially interesting is that when the homeowners were asked whether the energy consumption of their

“**IN THE CHANGING WORLD OF BUSINESS, PERSUASION NOW EXERTS A GREATER FORCE OVER OTHERS THAN FORCE ITSELF**”



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neighbours influenced their own, invariably they said that it did not. Yet as this study and numerous others show, the behaviour of those around us absolutely does influence our own actions.

ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

The implications for managers and leaders are clear. When looking to produce change and move people in new directions, it is important to point out and publicise how others like them are already embracing change. Importantly, managers should be careful to point out wanted behaviours as opposed to unwanted. Amazing as it may seem, pointing out unwanted actions and undesirable behaviours as 'regrettably frequent' can have the effect of increasing those very unwanted behaviours.

An IT manager I know once told me of a problem he had getting the employees of his company to use a new online reporting system. Each week he would send out a company-wide message publicising the number of employees who had either yet to log on or accurately report their activities online. Perhaps we can understand his actions. In his frustration he believed that by drawing attention to a large number of employees who had yet to embrace the change of system, he would raise awareness of the problem and that would be enough to right it. The reality was very different. His weekly message was actually promoting the very behaviour he didn't want, with countless employees perhaps thinking, 'Well, if lots of my colleagues have yet to log on, then maybe it's OK for me not to log on either'. When he changed his weekly email message to point out that 'large numbers of staff have successfully logged in this week' (which was true) he quickly achieved the turnaround he sought.

So, we'll more readily accept change if others around us do – an invaluable leadership lesson to learn. ■