

# Winning friends

## – and influencing people

Independent minded? Making your own decisions? Don't be too sure, warns **Ivan Robertson**. The science of influence and persuasion has moved on significantly in recent years, and we are all subject to it

**T**his month I'd like to focus on a couple of the key aspects of behaviour that are central to good management: getting things done through others and making decisions.

All managers have to persuade and influence other people, but equally there are also usually plenty of people trying to influence them. This puts the manager in a unique position because he or she has to live with the consequences of decisions made by others – while also trying to influence these decisions before they are made.

Most managers would no doubt like to feel that they are effective influencers, that their own decisions are based on business acumen, and that they are fairly resistant to the tactics and techniques of persuasion. But the science of influence has moved on significantly over recent years and we are all subject to it in some way, via the marketing and advertising we encounter every day.

And – however much we think this comes from a different world to our own in the public sector – there are some key principles that have important

implications for all managers.

Robert Cialdini, one of the leading researchers in this field, published his book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* in 1984. It has been updated several times since then and he and colleagues have recently published a new edition, *Yes! 50 Secrets from the Science of Persuasion*. I'd like to provide a flavour of the key principles and suggest some broad implications for good management.

The core principles of persuasion and influence are based on the fact that we often don't have time, or are simply not able, to take in all the relevant facets of an item of communication – so we have developed shortcuts. These shortcuts are generally useful and help us to cope with large amounts of information and make decisions.

For example, one of the most frequently employed shortcuts relies on the use of "social proof". A good example of its use to influence us is the inclusion of pre-recorded laughter on the soundtrack of comedy programmes. A very obvious influencing tactic – but it works!

One of the most fundamental ways in which we try to decide what is the right thing to do is to pay attention to what others do. Stand still near a high building and look up for a while if you want to see the power of social proof for yourself – others will soon be doing the same.

Another principle is that of commitment and consistency. We all value consistency – and once we have made a commitment in a certain direction, however small, we will try to maintain it – even if a much bigger commitment is now required.

In one remarkable study, reported in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, a staggering 76 per cent of people agreed to allow public service boards to be erected on their front lawns, even after being shown a photograph of a huge, poorly

lettered board, almost obscuring the front of a house. Normally the great majority of people (83 per cent) refused this request.

Why did they all agree? Because the boards were promoting road safety, and the people who agreed had two weeks earlier accepted an invitation to commit to road safety, by displaying a three inch square sign – they were just being consistent.

The principle of reciprocity underpins another important shortcut. Reciprocity is very powerful in influencing what people do. For example, imagine you were collecting for charity on the street: if you opened the door of the nearest shop for people going into it your takings would soon start to rise compared with those of a passive friend standing nearby.

Dennis Regan demonstrated the reciprocity effect by getting an accomplice (posing as a participant in an experiment) to bring other participants a soft drink. Afterwards the accomplice asked the participants if they would buy raffle tickets. Those who had been given the free drink bought many more tickets than the ones who hadn't.

Other key principles include liking (being more easily influenced by people we like, or feel are similar to ourselves) and scarcity (we value things that are in limited supply more highly).

The principles and techniques of persuasion are relevant to managers in at least two ways. First, Cialdini himself stresses that the primary value in understanding the science of influence and persuasion is to avoid falling into the trap of allowing normally useful shortcuts to influence one's own actions when they should not.

So the next time you are in a situation where someone is trying to influence you (a common experience for most public service managers) make a quick mental check that social proof, reciprocity or any of the other key factors are not pushing you to take a shortcut to the wrong conclusion.

The other way in which these principles can be important is in reviewing and checking your own attempts at influence and persuasion to ensure that they are as powerful as possible – for example, getting people to sign up to hard-to-resist principles that are consistent with a bigger future goal that you are aiming to achieve.



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