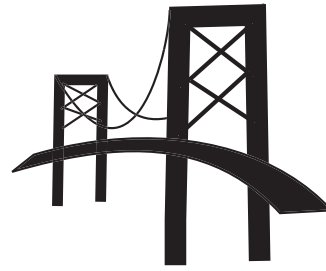


Nonprofit Research



Abridged

Connecting nonprofit sector research and leadership

Harnessing the Science of Influence

Implications for Nonprofit Leaders

Robert B. Cialdini, ASU Regent's Professor of Psychology, has studied influence and persuasion for over 30 years. Through extensive and often creative research, he has revealed six universal principles of influence, described in his book, *Influence: Science and Practice*.

Working with the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, (www.ssireview.com) he recently conducted research on nonprofit executive directors and consultants to learn how nonprofit organizations utilize principles of influence and discover ways they might employ the principles more effectively to benefit their organizations and communities. His article, "The Power of Persuasion: Putting the Science of Influence to Work in Fundraising,"¹ is summarized here.

For the last thirty years, I have studied persuasion and social influence, particularly, the factors that bring about compliance to a request. Although I have registered hundreds of individual compliance tactics, I've discovered that the great majority of techniques can be understood in terms of six basic principles of human behavior. I outline these six rules of persuasion in my book, *Influence: Science and Practice*, and explain how companies and professionals utilize them to gain compliance—sometimes from unknowing and unwilling targets.

But the six rules need not be employed dishonestly. Savvy individuals can make full use of them, ethically, bettering society and providing fulfillment to willing donors. How do they do it? To find out, the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* sent out a questionnaire to nonprofit executive directors and consultants, and asked them which of the six principles were most relevant to their fundraising work.

The survey results suggest that at least four rules offer unique opportunities for nonprofit development. They are 1) "reciprocity"—people try to repay, in kind, what another person has provided them; 2) "consistency"—once people

make a choice or take a stand, they encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with that commitment; 3) "scarcity"—opportunities seem more valuable when less available; 4) "authority"—people tend to defer to legitimate authorities as a decision-making shortcut.²

Although the use of these principles optimizes influence, they are employed optimally by only a fraction of the nonprofit professionals who could benefit from them. Many nonprofit leaders regularly fumble away the chance to employ the principles because they do not understand them or know how to harness their force. Others know quite well what the principles are and how they work, but they import them to achieve short-term goals while leaving a target feeling manipulated.

Successful nonprofit leaders understand the principles of influence and employ them ethically. Rather than putting people in a hammerlock, they uncover pre-existing affinities, "informing people to yes." As a consequence, even after complying, people are likely to feel positively toward the nonprofit and its cause, and are more willing to comply with future requests.

Reciprocity

Several years ago, a university professor sent Christmas cards to a sample of strangers. The response was amazing—holiday cards came pouring back from people he had never met. They received his holiday card, and they automatically sent cards in return.³

While small in scope, this study shows the potency of the rule of reciprocation, a principle each of us has been taught to live up to. Part of reciprocity's power stems from the fact that a person can trigger a feeling of indebtedness by doing an *uninvited* favor.

A familiar way nonprofits employ the reciprocation rule is by including gifts or trinkets with direct mail appeals. Including a small gift can dramatically improve the response rate; for one organization, including personalized address labels doubled the response. The use of the reciprocity strategy can backfire, however. When reciprocity is exploited to create unnatural obligations—where only one party benefits, and the other feels manipulated—the strategy may work in the short-term but will likely fail in time.

The good news is that it is not necessary to use the rule in a manipulative way. Nonprofit leaders can tap the reciprocity rule by uncovering and pointing out the services, benefits and advantages that having their organization in the community has already provided. The savvy nonprofit leader taps the reciprocity rule by describing support as payback for what the organization has already given.

People who have benefited personally from the organization's services may also reciprocate willingly. Former clients and alumni are obvious choices; but so too are donors and volunteers. Although we think of donors and volunteers as people who give to the organization, the relationship is not one-directional. Giving time or money to a charitable organization is often a positive, image-enhancing experience. Those who have been involved in your organization may feel indebted for the way it has enriched their lives and are likely to give further, when asked, in return.

Commitment and Consistency

Social psychologist Steven J. Sherman called a sample of Bloomington, Indiana residents as part of a survey and asked them to predict what they would say if asked to spend three hours collecting money for the American Cancer Society. Not wanting to seem uncharitable, many of these people said they would volunteer. The consequence of this subtle commitment procedure was a 700 percent increase in volunteers when, a few days later, a representative of the American Cancer Society did call and ask for neighborhood canvassers.⁴

At work here is a motive that lies deep within people, quite simply, the desire to be (and to appear) consistent with what we have already done. Once we make a choice or take a stand, however small initially, social and internal pressures prompt us to behave consistently with that commitment.

A person's sense of commitment deepens even further if the commitment is made voluntarily and publicly, and if it is written. Donors, for example, are much more likely to fulfill pledges that are uncoerced, public, and put in ink. In one study, college students volunteered for an AIDS education project. The researchers arranged for half to volunteer by filing out a form. The other half volunteered passively by *failing* to fill out a form saying they *didn't* want to volunteer. When asked to begin their volunteer activity, 74 percent who appeared for duty came from the ranks of those who had actively agreed to participate.⁵

Nonprofit volunteer managers and fundraisers who understand the principle of consistency and commitment can sow the seeds for future action through securing small commitments. Signing a petition, a facility visit, or attending an event can be the start of a person believing he or she is a champion of the cause and engaging in future behaviors to support that self-image. For volunteers and donors who have already committed, providing opportunities for them to deepen their commitment through public and written statements of support and intentions can increase future action.

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Scarcity

Almost everyone is vulnerable to the scarcity principle. Sometimes all that is necessary to make people want something is to tell them that before long, they can't have it. That's why advertisers use lines such as "limited supply," and "last chance offer." People want products and services more under those conditions.

While scarcity is commonly thought of as consuming products or services in limited supply, development directors can also take advantage of the scarcity rule by describing their organization's uncommon or unique features that cannot be found elsewhere. If an organization is the only one in a given country, or even a given city, providing a needed service, development officers can and should let potential donors know this. Giving to such an organization may make donors feel special and privy to something few are a part of. And directors should stress how a particular fundraising campaign will facilitate that uniqueness.

Nonprofits can also curry allegiance—and encourage future giving—by providing major givers with access and perks unavailable to the public. Kay Sprinkel Grace, a San Francisco-based consultant, advocates this approach. In the mid-1990's, for example, she advised a cathedral to offer major donors a "topping off" opportunity. With the church still under construction, top givers were invited to visit the site and write personal messages on the inner walls and pipes, which were later boarded over, sealing the messages inside – the definition of a limited time offer.

Authority

People are very willing to follow the suggestions of legitimate authorities. It is a mental shortcut that people can use—and usually be right—without having to think too much about a situation.

Consider one study, in which researchers arranged for a 31-year old man to violate the law by crossing the street against the red light and into traffic. In half the instances, he was dressed in a business suit and tie; the rest of the time, he wore a work shirt and trousers. The researchers

found that three times as many pedestrians were swept along behind the man into traffic, against the light and against the law, when he wore a suit—illustrating the power that just the *appearance* of authority can have on human behavior.

This rule provides a tool for nonprofit leaders who want to be more influential. Too many individuals who are genuine experts bungle away the opportunity to use this potent rule. They do so, for instance, by trying to persuade would-be donors without first mentioning their credentials, background, and experience with the matter.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium publishes "Seafood Watch," a wallet-sized card listing seafood in three categories—"best

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choices," "proceed with caution," and "avoid"—depending on how fish and shellfish are caught and farmed, and whether stocks are depleted. The cards are widely distributed.⁶

The main idea behind the cards is to raise awareness about sustainable oceans, and ultimately, to influence fishing practices. But they also serve to remind patrons that the aquarium is a leading expert on ocean conservation. So far, the aquarium has distributed close to one million cards since the program began in 2000. "It's not a direct fundraising appeal," says Jim Hekkers, the aquarium's executive vice president, "[but] it increases the credibility of the organization and it makes people more prone to either join as members or contribute as donors."

Notes:

1. Cialdini, R. "The Power of Persuasion: Putting the Science of Influence to Work in Fundraising," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Summer 2003), 18-27.
2. The two other principles are "social proof" and "liking." Because these two rules are so widely employed by fundraisers, this analysis focuses on the untapped potential of the other four.
3. Kunz, P.R. & Woolcott, M. "Season's Greetings: From My Status to Yours," *Social Science Research* 5: 269-278 (1976).
4. Sherman, S.J. "On the Self-Erasing Nature of Errors of Prediction," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 39: 211-221 (1980).
5. Cioffi, D. & Garner, R. "On Doing the Decision: The Effects of Active Versus Passive Choice on Commitment and Self-Perception," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 22: 133-147 (1996).
6. See www.mbayaq.org/cr/seafoodwatch.asp.

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CENTER NEWS

ASU's Sixth Annual Forum on Nonprofit Effectiveness will be held March 5, 2004 and will highlight existing resources and emerging efforts to build the capacity of Arizona nonprofit organizations and the nonprofit sector as a whole. Featured speakers include Audrey Alvarado, Executive Director, National Council of Nonprofit Associations and Sherry Salway Black, Senior Vice President, First Nations Development Institute. Arizona-based nonprofit capacity building organizations and resources will also be showcased. For more information, please visit the Center's website:

<http://nonprofit.asu.edu>

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