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Understanding Influence within a Project Community

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Overview

First, let me explain the big picture of our topic (emphasis by course author):

- **Influence** is *“The capacity or power of persons or things to be a compelling force or produce effects on the actions, behavior, opinions, etc., of others.”ⁱ*
- *“A **project** is a temporary group activity designed to produce a unique product, service, or result. [It is] temporary in that it has a defined beginning and end in time, and therefore defined scope and resources. And a project is unique in that it is not a routine operation, but a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal. So a project team often **includes people who do not usually work together – sometimes from different organizations and across multiple geographies.**”ⁱⁱ*

This *temporary community of people who do not usually work together* can be especially susceptible to clever application of influence by others specifically because they do not share enough common history that would tend to immunize them in more long-term settings.

This course rests on the model of a large-project* setting in which there are budget, schedule, planning, and delivery deadlines creating enormous pressures on team members every day. It is not about the typical examples of influence – i.e., who you know - but rather the more subtle situations that are around us every day and that we often overlook. Life teaches us about patterns and repetition. Those lessons provide the temptation to use mental shortcuts in familiar situations (or what we think is familiar) to act based on what we have experienced before, save a little time, and get a little more done instead of analyzing each situation as if it were never seen before.

These mental shortcuts – **if (that condition)... then (this result)** – can be helpful when we are correct but dangerous when we are wrong. We will examine many of these if-then shortcuts and help the student learn ways to recognize them to increase their project productivity while reducing their risk of project or career disaster.

*The author is using “large-project” to mean fifty or more people devoted exclusively to a single project for its duration. There is nothing magic or special about the number fifty. We simply use it as a size reference so students can view the course material from the same perspective as written the course author.

Introduction

Messages from radio, television, friends, and family bombard us daily trying to influence our behavior. These have evolved from overt attempts more than a century ago to sell strange products like lozenges that will [“kill worms in delicate children.”](#) to the iconic image of [longevity and staying power](#) – the Energizer Bunny, to more subtle suggestions appealing to [male vanity](#) via the “Marlboro Man.”

As children, our mothers tried to influence our appearance with questions like, “...*you’re not going out dressed like THAT are you?*” or urged us to not cry when we got hurt and “*to act like a big boy or girl!*” We acted differently around our friends due to the influence of peer pressure than we did at home. Now that we are adults, the subconscious influence of body language, subtle inflections in speech or cultural customs drive many of our reactions to those we encounter providing the clues we need to respond appropriately and facilitate the interactions between us.

The large-project community is a microcosm of the greater world from which we came before assignment to the project. The amplified project pressures of budget, schedule, and productivity deadlines while learning to work with strangers means that we must focus hard on maintaining sociability for project harmony while constantly exposed to behaviors, sights, or sounds that trigger automatic reactions within us that may or may not be appropriate.

The greater our awareness of the behavioral, stimulus-response triggers we encounter and the attempts by others to influence our actions, the greater the likelihood we will think before acting and then act in a way that either helps us or at least does not harm us. Collectively, the more that we can think before acting will improve the project’s overall harmony and the less career damage those actions will pose for us.



The Concept of Stimulus-Response

This course relies heavily upon the concept of stimulus-response famously identified by the Russian scientist, Ivan Pavlov. When his laboratory dogs heard a bell that signaled feeding time, they would begin to salivate as lab technicians filled their bowls with food. Soon, they associated the sound of the bell with eating and began salivating even without the food being present. They became conditioned to respond in a predictable way associated with the particular stimulusⁱⁱⁱ

As humans, we, too, are conditioned to various social stimuli and (usually) respond in a socially acceptable or predictable manner.

- A socially acceptable response is our attempt to fit in with others by acting in a manner that shows them our awareness of social customs and fitness to reside within the community.
- A socially predictable response is the attempt by others to get us to react in a predictable manner – like Pavlov’s dogs - usually to their advantage. Please note that something to their advantage does not necessarily mean it is to our disadvantage.

If someone picks up something we have dropped and hands it to us, we will demonstrate our social skills and fitness for community membership by smiling and saying, “thank you.”

If someone in a crowded elevator wants us to consider him or her as non-threatening, he or she will smile at us.

We will predictably (in most cases) smile back briefly and visibly lose a little tension in our stance or face while waiting for the doors to open.

We broadly group these stimulus-response principles into six categories:

1. **Reciprocation** – I do something first with the expectation that you will do something I want or can expect in return
2. **Consistency** – We feel a need to be perceived by others (and ourselves) as consistent and reliable in our actions.
3. **Social proof** – A means to demonstrate that our actions are aligned with the community around us or to gain insight into desired actions by observing the community around us.

4. **Affinity** – A liking of something or someone and/or a desire to be liked by others in return. A desire to ‘fit in.’
5. **Authority** – We tend to follow the directions (whether explicit or implied) of those we perceive as authority figures.
6. **Scarcity** – We tend to act more quickly if we believe the time available to act or the available stock of a product we desire is running out.^{iv}

Here are some common situations of influence that exist in many large-project settings. Remember, using these does not mean that a person is up to no good and a manipulator; it can mean they are very aware of human nature and adept at applying their influential skills to make their work a little easier. (No one ever said that project work has to be hard, it just needs to be correct, timely, and within budget.)

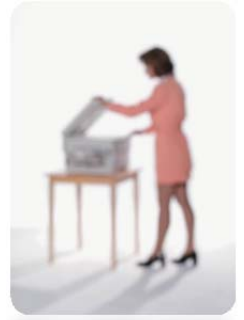
As we mentioned [earlier](#) about Pavlov’s dogs and salivation, when a trigger event happens, there is a resulting behavior that almost always follows. When we hear our name mentioned (the trigger or cause) within the general conversational buzz of a break during a meeting, we automatically tune out all the chatter around us and focus on what the speaker says about us (the effect). When an attractive stranger smiles at us across a room (the cause), we typically smile back (the effect). This is not rocket science; it is behavior as old as humanity.

Seeking Favors

An example of this stimulus/response on a project can be the simple act of asking someone for a favor. For many people, the extent of how well you know the ‘asker’ will determine the likelihood that you will respond in the way they desire.

However, scientific studies have shown that, regardless of how well you know them, the chances for compliance will improve ***if you give them a reason for doing it.***^v

The classical study about asking for favors published in 1978 involved a few people waiting in line to use a copier at a library. When the researcher wanted to break into line, she asked, “Excuse me, I only have five pages. May I use the copier?” She was successful 60% of the time.



But when she rephrased it differently on another day with another group in line, it went like this: “Excuse me, I only have five pages. May I use the copier because I am in a hurry?” and her success rate jumped to 94%.

What made the difference? Initially, the researchers thought it was because she added a reason – “because I’m in a hurry.” Further investigation discovered that it was not the entire cause of compliance - *because I am in a hurry* – but rather only the first word ‘**because.**’

They proved this by adding a relative non-reason as justification; i.e., “Excuse me, I only have five pages. May I use the copier because I need to make some copies” and the compliance rate was an amazing 93%!

Although nothing new was given as legitimate justification – why else be in the copier line than to make copies - the simple word **because** stimulated the compliance effect.

PROJECT APPLICATION: Give people the “because” of a request and your chances of a desirable outcome increase dramatically.

Expensive = Value

An example of stimulus/response, given in one of the reference books used as a resource for this course^{vi} told a story about a vendor selling turquoise jewelry to tourists in Arizona. When pieces were not selling well, the storeowner sent a message telling their clerk to mark everything down by ½. Somehow, the clerk transposed the message and DOUBLED all the prices.

Soon, they sold out the entire inventory! Further analysis by the author determined that when people are buying goods with which they are not familiar – such as tourists wanting turquoise jewelry in Arizona – they have one of two choices available if they want the goods:

A classic example of this is the story of Chivas Regal Scotch Whiskey which was a struggling brand until its managers decided to raise its price well above the competition even though nothing else changed.

The sales skyrocketed and it has been an international phenomenon ever since. (Aaker, 1991)

1. Do the necessary research on their own to determine what constitutes value with turquoise jewelry
2. Rely on past experience when the more expensive items were typically the greater value such as buying clothes, televisions, or automobiles.

Since it would difficult for a tourist standing in front of a shop counter to do their own research on turquoise jewelry, it was simpler to take the mental shortcut response based on past experiences that **higher prices mean higher value**. The stimulus of the accidental higher prices by the vendor triggered the auto-response of the customer.

PROJECT APPLICATION: The inverse of this is also true. If we think something costs too little relative to the value we think it has, we consider it “too cheap” and do not buy it.

Many sales professionals are aware of this and start something at a much higher price only to mark it down so we think we are getting a bargain. Meanwhile, the vendor is still getting his intended price. Remember this when negotiating with project vendors.

Compare and Contrast

Successful retail clothing store sales staff understands the powerful influence of the compare-contrast presentation sequence to customers. The powerful secret is that when the second item is different from the first, we will tend to see it as **more different** than it really is.

If a customer comes into a store to buy a suit and a sweater, studies have shown that customers are more likely to balk at the price of the sweater when presented first. But, when offered *after the suit*, customers are more likely to consider a sweater that is more expensive than they had originally considered because, in comparison to the cost of the suit, it seems like a bargain. Automobile sales people use the same compare-contrast strategy when adding options to our purchase. If we have already decided to spend thousands for the car, then just a little more for each small-priced option (presented separately, not in a bundle, to preserve the huge contrast in prices of the car and the little option) does not seem like much in comparison. They have cleverly used their knowledge of the compare-contrast model to influence us to spend a lot more than we had planned for that budget-fitting car we thought we were buying.

PROJECT APPLICATION

Here(and on the next page) are several applications of the compare-contrast influence in a project setting

Project Vendors - Remember this influence model when purchasing or upgrading equipment, goods, or services from existing or new vendors.

Getting things done – When you want something done via an attitude of commitment (“I want to do it” which gives you a better result) instead of an attitude of compliance (“I have to do it” – they will do the least they can to get by), give them the option of picking between two choices.

If you make the first choice particularly disagreeable, they will probably take the second one. (This is especially useful when you have a favored outcome and make it the second option.)

A variation of the “getting things done” model above is the one we call “**no choice with options.**” It can be used in at least two ways:

1. If something needs to be done and you do not really care which choice they make, let them make the selection.

For example, you will need someone to work late one night this week because the weather has put you a little behind schedule. You could phrase the question like this, “Joe, the weather has put us a little behind schedule and we need to catch up. Which night this week can you work late to help us?”

You have not asked if they want to (the “no choice” part of the model)– your position is that you expect they will – but have given them the option of picking a night (the “options” part of the model) because you really don’t care as long as it gets done.

2. It took the course author several years to catch on to his wife using a similar model on him: “Would you rather try to get reservations, get dressed up, and go to [the expensive restaurant] or go casually to [family style restaurant]?”

She never asked if I wanted to go at all but gave me the choice between two extremes. And, since she much prefers the family style restaurant, comparing it to the expensive one and the effort to dress appropriately while placing it second always influenced me to choose it. Unless I had some serious reason not to go, I always agreed.

Section Summary

The advantage of a mental shortcut is its efficiency in saving us time in decision-making so we do not have to do the research that we would if we had never encountered it or a similar situation before. The disadvantage is that we are vulnerable to making costly mistakes by *assuming* the current situation is not only like a similar one we have encountered in the past but that it will also have a similar (pleasant) outcome. Obviously, that does not always happen.

The danger to you is that clever people know about those influential traits, too, and may use them against you by manipulating prices or terms of an agreement in such a way as to gain the upper hand.

Reciprocation

In a university study in the 1970s^{vii}, a researcher sent out Christmas cards to perfect strangers to see what would happen. Although he expected some response, he was amazed at the number of cards that came pouring in *without ever asking who he was or how the recipients knew him*. It was another example of the stimulus/response reflex of humans.

This need to repay a favor, to reciprocate their good deed toward us ***even if we do not know who they are nor if we initiated it***, can drive some people to distraction because they are so determined to be relieved of the obligation of repayment whether in kind, similar value, or – worst of all – something to be determined later by the original donor.

The immense power of reciprocation is self-inflicted and directly proportional to our own ego because we always see the situation through the eyes of our peers:

- We do not want to appear socially ignorant – thus earning their disdain - of the practice by failing to respond appropriately
- We do not want to appear “cheap” by returning the favor with something that may be perceived of lesser value
- We do not want to be seen as unreliable by not reciprocating promptly or at all
- We are tempted to “one up” them by reciprocating with a gesture perceived as grander than theirs was to us.

Uninvited Debts

The rule of reciprocity is so strong that it can compel a person to agree to something under a self-imposed sense of obligation when they would never agree if it were not for the need to “repay” something. If we couple that power with an affinity for the person, it becomes practically impossible to say “NO!”



An example of this that nearly everyone has encountered is the auto salesperson who tries to be as ingratiating as possible. They greet us with a smile and try hard to become our instant best friend. Every

comment we make is witty, insightful, or extremely interesting to them. They know that we are more disposed to react the way they want if we can act as if we either are friends or find them somewhat likable, so they try their hardest to be so.

As our new best friend, they are willing to work with us to find the lowest price possible with the greatest trade-in allowance for our car. We are all smiles, thinking about what a great deal we have – probably better than we expected, and only have to wait a few minutes while he or she runs the deal past the sales manager.

They return with either a sad face or a look of irritation because the “unreasonable sales manager” will not let them allow us that much for our trade nor throw in the few small options they were willing to give us. He is so sorry but asks if we could pay just a little more each month for the options we thought would be free because “this is the car you want and ***I’ve worked so hard for you.***”

Since we are already there, have spent time talking about it, and probably done a test drive, if there is not something very unusual about the new situation, the power of reciprocity – *rewarding them for all their hard work on our behalf and that we like him or her* - probably compels us to buy the car.

Here is further proof of this power. The 1960s saw the arrival of the Hare Krishna religious movement in the United States from India.^{viii} Group members had shaved their heads, wore ill-fitting robes, wrapped their legs in cloth, played simple instruments, and chanted their songs while seeking donations from passers-by at street corners and airports. Initially, the public saw them as generally “weird” and avoided contact with them.



Obviously, a perception of weird and trying to solicit money from strangers did not work out very well, so they decided to change their tactics and employed the powerful tool of reciprocity – a *sense of obligation*. They began offering gifts to people such as an inexpensive paperback explaining their religion or, even cheaper yet, a flower. “Please accept this gift from us as a

gesture of peace and love” was their pitch. They resisted people’s attempts to deny the ‘gift’ by cleverly helping them feel better about accepting it.

“However, a small donation to help us further our good works would certainly be appreciated if you would like to do so” gave the victim a way out of the unexpected and unwanted obligation.

Regardless of how weird people may have thought the Hare Krishnas to be, the power of reciprocity compelled them to make a donation even if they dropped the “gifts” into the next trash can they passed. [The researcher of this study once followed a Krishna member as they retrieved many castaway flowers from nearby trash cans where the donation victims had tossed them. There was no way to tell how many times those flowers had been recycled!]

A critical aspect of the Krishna strategy is to present the flowers as **gifts, not commercial products for sale**. It is very easy to say you do not want to buy something but nearly impossible not to reciprocate when receiving a gift. (Of course, if you would like to reduce your sense of obligation with a small donation, they would be happy to receive it.)

If you have not encountered a Hare Krishna at your airport, you may have eaten at a restaurant and had a server do one of these:

1. Introduce themselves by name
2. Squat down next to the table when introducing themselves
3. Wear big, open mouthed smiles
4. Wear unusual ornaments or items of clothing
5. Entertain customers with jokes or puzzles
6. Practice suggestive selling
7. Repeat customers' orders back to them
8. Touch customers briefly on the arm or shoulder
9. Forecast good weather
10. Write "Thank You" on the check
11. Draw pictures on the check
12. Use tip trays embossed with credit card logos
13. Call customers by name
14. Give customers after dinner candies.



If so, they were trying to get you to like them and increase your order which would increase their tip. That list came from a study at Cornell University in 1997.^{ix}

Or, have you tried a free sample at the grocery store and then bought the product? Maybe you received a trial period for a product made with the promise you can return it afterward for only shipping and handling. Promoters of those products are very confident that once we have tried something, the obligation to pay for it is very strong.

The Danger of Indebtedness

Although the socially accepted rule of reciprocity evolved as a means for group members to create and strengthen ties between them, there is a critical danger hidden within it: we rarely have a way to control the size of the “payback.”

Suppose one morning your car does not start and you ask your neighbor for a jump. He or she complies, your car starts, and you are so happy that you will not be late for work, you say, “*Thanks so much!*”



Now you have the dilemma of repayment of the debt. What do you do: offer to pay them something; promise to cut their grass; or do you create an open-ended obligation by saying, “*If I can ever help you, just let me know!*”

Your offer to return the favor makes you feel good because you have acknowledged the debt and offered a ‘credit’ to them as a claim check. But what is the limit of the payback? Can they borrow your car someday when theirs does not start, do you paint their house, loan them some money? **The danger here is the risk of a greatly disproportionate payback claim using your sense of obligation against you.** (The risk of our being labeled “ingrate” or “moocher” is something we do not want spread among our peer group.)

The danger of reciprocity does not exist, though, *for strong communal bonds such as a family or long-term relationships between friends.* Here, each member offers help (or asks for it) when needed. The reciprocity is the willingness to help, not any specific repayment of an individual

act. “I’m always there for you” is an unspoken promise that assures a strong mutual connection between members.

PROJECT APPLICATION: Beware of “gifts” from vendors or others that could gain an advantage by having you feel indebted to them. (This is beyond the ethical considerations of accepting gifts.)

If you cannot repay them promptly in sufficient proportion to relieve your sense of being in debt, then be sure to steel yourself for some point in the future when they ask for repayment that is much bigger than their favor to you. You simply have to say, “No, that’s not reasonable. Thank you for helping me before but I cannot do that.”

(The converse of this application means that you could voluntarily do a lot of favors for other teammates and gradually build a store of credits in which they would be indebted to you.)

Reciprocal Concessions

A school student at your door asks, *“Hello, sir (or ma’am). Would you like to buy a \$10.00 ticket to our school band presentation next Thursday night?”*

You: *“No thank you, I have a previous engagement for next Thursday night.”* (The last thing you want to do is spend an evening listening to a bunch of amateur musicians in the school band.)

Student: *“Well, OK. Would you like to make a small donation for new uniforms for our band?”*

You: *“OK, I will do that. Let me get my wallet.”*

This is a variation on the [no choice with option](#) we discussed earlier. The student solicitor never asks if you would like to do one or the other, they simply give you the bigger option first (‘bigger’



in this case is making the effort to attend the event – especially if you value your down time at home after work and do not have any children in the school - not the \$10).

But, since you probably feel a sense of obligation to help somehow and would feel bad closing the door in the face of a student simply asking for help – the law of reciprocation - you select the easier option of a cash donation. And since the amount of \$10 has already come up in the dialogue that is probably the amount you offer.

The student made an initial request for help. You denied that but feeling a sense of obligation, you conceded a more convenient form of help with a cash donation which the solicitor accepted. Now the social balance is level again. Each side agreed to a lesser position. You saved your conscience and the band received a donation. (This is also known as a rejection-then-retreat scenario.)

PROJECT APPLICATION: If a vendor or someone else on the project gives you an option of selecting between one of two choices, and the second choice has a specific number in it, carefully think about the specific number before you agree.

There is a high probability that the specific number they are giving you is what they want from you. If that number is acceptable to you, then go ahead and do it. Otherwise, take a moment to be aware of this tactic and select a number or option that is more comfortable for you.

If you want to try this on someone else, you can make an initial request that is obviously something they would not want to do and then offer them a smaller second one that they probably will do. Obviously, you hide what you really want in your second request and there is a high probability that you will get it.

Commitment and Consistency

Human beings like consistency - another word for reliability. Few things bother us more than people who are not reliable or fearing that we are seen by others as unreliable.

Psychological researchers tested the commitment and consistency theory in an interesting experiment on a New York City beach. In this study, an accomplice of the researchers put a blanket down five feet from the blanket of a randomly chosen individual who was the unwitting experimental subject. After several minutes of relaxing on the blanket listening to music from a portable radio, the accomplice would stand up and leave the blanket to walk down the beach.

Soon thereafter, a researcher, pretending to be a thief, would approach the radio, grab it, and try to hurry away. This experiment was conducted 20 times and the subject challenged the accomplice with the radio only four times – a 20% ratio.

However, when the same experiment was tried another 20 times with new subjects, the accomplice said, "Please watch that for me" and everyone agreed to do so. Now that they had made a commitment to watch the radio, 19 out of 20 (95%) of the subjects became vigilantes and challenged the researcher when they tried to take the radio.^x

The lesson here is that people want to be seen as consistent with their commitments. Once they had agreed to watch the radio, it became their moral obligation to challenge anyone who attempts to take it and thus violate their commitment of guarding it.

Another application of the consistency theory is when you draw people's attention to their previous action. For example, if you have completed a project for me that took a week to complete and this new project is similar to the last one, I could reasonably expect to get it within a week. To make sure that I get from you within that week, I could say, *"This project is just like the last one you did for me that took a week. Can I expect this one from you within a week, also?"*

Unless there is some compelling reason why you could not get it back, there is a strong possibility that you will agree to my deadline even if you actually think it might take longer. Your

internal drive to conform to the rule of consistency is probably stronger than your possible desire to take longer and risk being seen as someone who is inconsistent.

PROJECT APPLICATION: If you have a very important deadline on your project or a specific commitment that must be made by a teammate, be sure to ask them face-to-face or in a conversation over the telephone instead of in a written request.

As strange as it may seem, this research proves that human beings make a greater effort to meet their verbal commitments than any they may have received in writing or that may have been buried in the conversation.

Another variation of a direct commitment is to put together a team code of conduct when the project begins. During your first meeting, ask the team members to identify the 4 or 5 traits that they believe would indicate that someone is a strong team member. You may get comments like, “is reliable”, “communicate well”, “always on time”, “offer help before being asked.” etc.

After you have collected the traits that they all agree on, ask them to sign the document indicating that they are strong supporters of the team’s code of conduct. If you will copy this document that they have all signed, give them each copies of it, plus, put a copy in a prominent meeting room in the project door at various places around the project, you will find that their commitments to do these things will be much higher than if you did not ask.

Also, this makes a great tool for leaders who may have underperforming team members. For example, if a team member is frequently late to work or late in meeting deadlines, show them a copy of the code of conduct where the team said. “Be on time”, or “be reliable” are desirable traits and where the employee signed the code. This changes the situation from a confrontation between the supervisor and the employee to simply between the employee and his public commitment.

A variation of the direct commitment - when someone asks you specifically do something - is an implied commitment. With the implied commitment, the other person may ask you something like, “If I can get this price down to less than \$100, would you be willing to buy it?”

If you did not think they could really get down to that, you might say, “Sure, I would buy for less than \$100 if you could do that” and you would think that is the end of the conversation. What

normally happens then is the other person is able to provide the product for less than \$100 and now expects you to buy it. Too late, you realize that if they had not been able to do it to begin with, they would not have asked you that question.

This internal sense of commitment is probably stronger than you realize. Have you ever seen a gasoline price along the interstate that you thought was very good but once you pull up next to the pump, you realize the actual price is several cents higher than the sign that attracted you? Since you made the mental commitment to stop and get gas, do you get back in the car in search of a lower price or you just fill up in a few cents higher per gallon where you are?

Start Small and Build

This concept was proven effective as a result of a study conducted in 1966. It was based on the old salesman's foot-in-the-door-technique. In the experiment, a researcher posing as a volunteer worker had gone door-to-door in a residential California neighborhood making a strange request of homeowners. The homeowners were asked to allow a public service billboard be installed on their front lawn. To get an idea of the way the sign would look, they were shown a photograph depicting an attractive house, with a view which was almost completely obscured by the very large, poorly lettered sign reading, **Drive Carefully**. Although the great majority of the residents in the area understandably refused the request, only 17% agreed, one particular group of people reacted very favorably. A full 76% of them offered the use of their front yards.

The primary reason for their startling compliance has to do with something that had happened to them about two weeks earlier: they had made a small commitment to driver safety. A different "volunteer worker " had come to the doors and asked them to accept and display a 3 inch square sign that read, **Be a Safe Driver**. It was such a trifling request that nearly all of them agreed to do it but the effects of that request were enormous. Because they had innocently complied with a trivial safe-driving request couple weeks before, these homeowners became remarkably willing to comply with another such request was massive in size.^{xi}

The researchers decided to push their research a little farther. A new volunteer worker went to residents in a new community and asked if they would sign a petition stating, **Keep California beautiful!** Naturally, many people signed this because they all agreed that they wanted to keep California beautiful. Approximately 2 weeks later, another research worker went through the same neighborhoods asking the people who signed the previous petition if they would be willing to put a large sign in their front yard saying, **Drive Carefully.** Approximately half of the people who had signed the petition, saying that they wanted to keep California beautiful agreed to having these huge signs in their front yard.

When you think about it there seems to be no connection between large signs & petition's. What the researchers finally discovered was that the people had changed their self-perception. They now saw themselves as public oriented citizens, not just simple homeowners.

The lesson for this goes back to the concept of start small and build big. If you can get people to agree to trivial matters, then you can keep coming back and increasing the size of their commitment until they have agreed to do something that is way beyond their initial expectation.

PROJECT APPLICATION: If you have prior experience on projects like your current one and can foresee a need that you will have on a project far enough in the future, you may be able to recruit helpers with the start-small-and-build process.

Think about the citizens in the experiment who wanted to be seen as being public spirited. On a project, everyone wants to be seen as a good team player or team member. When you begin your small requests for help, tell him that you appreciate them and they are a good team player by helping you out with this seemingly small, insignificant request.

If you go back periodically with something just a little larger, by the time you get to the large needs that you anticipate having, you may have cultivated a wide support group that are happy to help.

Give Them Personal Standards to Meet

Researchers have found that it is important to us that our associates think well of us.^{xii} For proof of this, researchers found that after hearing they were considered to be charitable people, residents in New Haven, Connecticut gave much more money to a canvasser from the Multiple Sclerosis Association than they had previously given. Apparently, the mere knowledge that someone viewed them as most charitable causes people to make their actions consistent with that view and give more.

An example of using this common tactic is when politicians, before entering important negotiations with others, make a public statement saying something to the effect that *we know the other side is interested in a fair and equitable outcome that will benefit both sides and we look forward to negotiations with them*. This public statement can nudge them very subtly toward the other side's viewpoint because they want the public to see them as fair and equitable.

PROJECT APPLICATION: Before dealing with others in negotiations or starting an important phase of the project, be sure to state publically in a meeting (or some other public venue) how much you're looking forward to working with people who are so [insert the traits you want] "reliable, budget conscious, timeline sensitive, team spirited, etc."

Give the other side a public standard to live up to (that coincidentally benefits you) and you may be able to influence their behavior to your advantage.

Conversely, if you feel that a change in viewpoint may be necessary in the future because of some unforeseen event, be sure to include that condition as an escape clause in your public statement.

"If our vendors can meet their delivery commitments and the weather cooperates, we can make that deadline" gives you an escape clause when dealing with conditions over which you have no control.

The Dangers of “Low Ball”

“Low Ball” is a technique used primarily by auto dealers to offer an artificially high trade-in amount for your used car and/or an artificially low price on the new car that you want. The idea is to gain your commitment to the dealership by teasing you with numbers that your gut tells you are too good to be true. [This is an expansion of the [uninvited debts](#) concept earlier.]

Once you have test-driven the car and are back at the dealership, the salesperson goes off to propose the deal to the “sales manager.” (If this is a new sales person, they will probably actually talk to the sales manager. If it is an experienced one, they will probably just duck out of sight for a snack, drink, or a cigarette before coming back.)



Now back, they deliver the bad news (with appropriate sad facial expressions) that the sales manager had not approved either the estimate for your trade or the low price you thought you were getting. In fact, the “approved” price of the car you want is amazingly close to the actual prices you saw offered on the same car by competing dealerships selling the same car!

The salesperson is relying on your mental commitment to the dealership, the work they did for you, and your internal desire for consistency to get you past the sudden change in the financials and agree to get the car.

PROJECT APPLICATION: The dangers of a lowball deception using money with vendors is obvious. A less obvious strategy is to use promises instead of cash.

For example, if I need you to work late tomorrow, I may offer a “trade” where I’ll let you off early next week if you’ll stay late tomorrow. Let’s say you agree because the promise of early off next week sounds almost too good to be true.

But, when next week comes and you want off, I sadly tell you that the “boss” says we have got to have everybody at work to get this project finished. Although certainly devious, my greatest asset is your work ethic to help get the work done and respect the boss’ rules. Granted, I can’t use it on you too frequently but the few times that I can may be all that I need.

A trip to Abilene

A potentially dangerous method of influence is the presence of the Abilene Paradox within a project team meeting when thoughts like these are running through the minds of the participants:

- I'm the newest member of the group and do not feel like I have earned my place at the table yet
- I care a lot about this issue, but I care more about keeping my job. I am going to keep my mouth shut.
- If I express my real opinions on this issue, someone will give me an extra assignment, or put me in charge of finding alternatives. I just cannot handle one more thing on my desk right now.
- The project sponsor has put so much effort into this proposal; I do not want to hurt her feelings.
- It is really up to my boss. That is why they pay him the big bucks.

The Abilene paradox occurs when groups take action that contradicts what the members of the group silently agreed they want or need to do. Management expert Jerry B. Harvey in his article, *The Abilene Paradox and other Meditations on Management*, introduced the Abilene paradox.^{xiii}

The name of the phenomenon comes from an anecdote in the article which he uses to elucidate the paradox:

On a hot afternoon visiting in Coleman, Texas, the family is comfortably playing dominoes on a porch, until the father-in-law suggests that they take a trip to Abilene [53 miles north] for dinner. The wife says, "Sounds like a great idea." The husband, despite having reservations because the drive is long and hot, thinks that his preferences must be out-of-step with the group and says, "Sounds good to me. I just hope your mother wants to go." The mother-in-law then says, "Of course I want to go. I haven't been to Abilene in a long time."

The drive is hot, dusty, and long. When they arrive at the cafeteria, the food is as bad as the drive. They arrive back home four hours later, exhausted.

One of them dishonestly says, "It was a great trip, wasn't it?" The mother-in-law says that, actually, she would rather have stayed home, but went along since the other three were so

enthusiastic. The husband says, "I wasn't delighted to be doing what we were doing. I only went to satisfy the rest of you." The wife says, "I just went along to keep you happy. I would have had to be crazy to want to go out in the heat like that." The father-in-law then says that he only suggested it because he thought the others might be bored.

The group sits back, perplexed that they together decided to take a trip which none of them wanted. They each would have preferred to sit comfortably, but did not admit to it when they still had time to enjoy the afternoon.

PROJECT APPLICATION: This is worth getting the training video and training materials from [CRM Learning](#) and spending a few hours before the project starts introducing the team to this concept.

I have used it several times in project kick-off meetings to make sure everyone speaks up and does not let the team take an expensive, resource-wasting trip to Abilene.

Advertising Examples

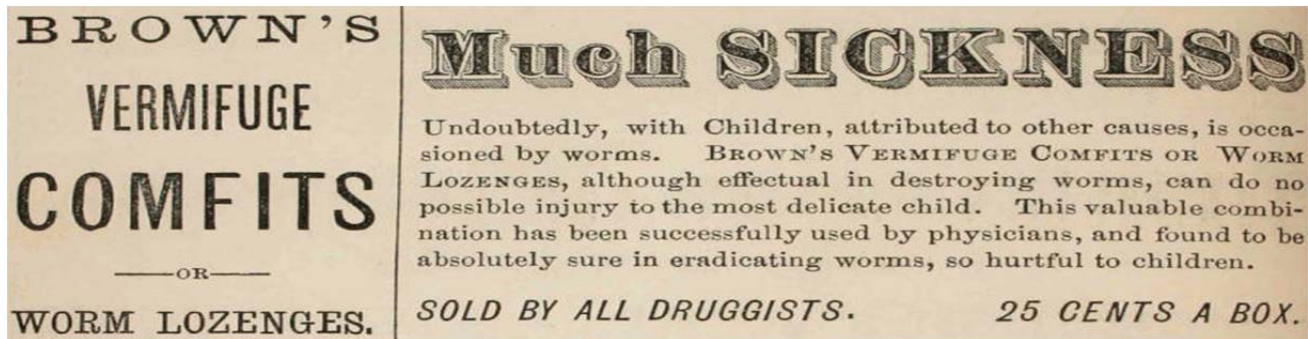


Figure 1



Figure 2



Timepix

Marlboro Man 1

Endnotes

- ⁱ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/influence>
- ⁱⁱ <http://www.pmi.org/en/About-Us/About-Us-What-is-Project-Management.aspx>
- ⁱⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_conditioning
- ^{iv} http://www.amazon.com/Influence-Practice-Robert-B-Cialdini/dp/0205609996/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1285093499&sr=1-2
- ^v The Construct of Mindfulness, Langor, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978
- ^{vi} http://www.amazon.com/Influence-Practice-Robert-B-Cialdini/dp/0205609996/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1285093499&sr=1-2
- ^{vii} Kunz & Walcott, 1976
- ^{viii} <http://www.harekrishna.com/>
- ^{ix} <http://www.hotelschool.cornell.edu/research/chr/pubs/reports/abstract-13602.html>
- ^x Moriarty, 1975
- ^{xi} Influence: Science and Practice, Robert B. Cialdini, fourth edition, copyright 2001 pp.65-67
- ^{xii} Kraut, 1973
- ^{xiii} Harvey, Jerry B. (Summer 1974). "The Abilene Paradox and other Meditations on Management".