3 Scientifically Proven Ways to Become More Influential

Everyone wants to be influential. Each of us desire to communicate in a way that inspires others to listen and act upon our ideas. In fact, if you reflect upon your last few social encounters you will quickly realize that you are regularly putting forth ideas that you want others to comply with. It does not matter whether you are attempting to resolve a discrepancy on your telephone bill, convince your child to clean his or her room or persuade your boss to give you a raise, you are constantly attempting to influence others. Because influence is so ingrained in human communication, your ability to influence others will determine your level of success and the quality of your life.

In the past, though some basic knowledge about how people were influenced was known, much of what produces influence was a mystery. Discerning how to influence another person was viewed as an art form because how influence occurs had never been systematically analyzed. However, this is no longer the case. In the last few decades there have been thousands of scientific studies focused on obtaining an exact understanding of what creates and enables influence. The conclusions of this mountain of research have revolutionized what behavioral scientists know regarding the measurable and repeatable principles that generate influence. For example, the scientific principles of influence have been proven to cause high school students to refrain from smoking,[1] increase lifesaving blood donations,[2] and prevent youth from joining gangs.[3] As a result of the discovery of these powerful scientific principles, social scientists confidently assert that, "everyone's ability to persuade others can be improved by learning persuasion strategies that have been scientifically proven to be successful. Even people who consider themselves persuasion lightweights – people who feel they couldn't convince a child to play with toys – can learn to become persuasion heavyweights by understanding the psychology of persuasion and by using the specific persuasion strategies that have been scientifically proven to be effective."[4]

Though there are many scientific principles that you could employ to heighten your ability to influence others, the following are three practical, easy to execute ways to generate positive influence and prompt a pleasant social interaction.

1. Labeling

Labeling is a practical, yet potent scientific principle of influence. Labeling is when one assigns a label to another and then requests behavior that is consistent with the label. There have been many research studies that have confirmed the persuasive clout of labeling. One such study sought to analyze how voting could be increased.[5] Researchers interviewed citizens before a major election. After answering some questions about past voting behaviors, the researchers randomly told some of the participants that they were "above-average citizens likely to vote and participate in political events." The other half of the participants were informed that they were only average in their likelihood to vote and partake in political functions. The impact of this seemingly trivial label was profound. Those who were told that they were above average and likely to vote in the upcoming political election voted at a significantly

higher ratio than those who were told they were merely average. What's more, labeling has also been proven to improve children's performance in school[6] as well as charitable giving.[7] [8]

When the principle of labeling is executed correctly, it will produce astonishing results. Though there are many ways that you can apply this principle, one of the simplest is to praise the behavior that you want to increase. As a general rule, when you praise someone for behaving a certain way, it has far more persuasive power than reprimanding them for not acting as you desire. The reason that labeling is so influential is that when one communicates that he or she has a positive image of another person, that person will begin to see themselves through that positive viewpoint. For instance, if a co-worker reveals to you that she thinks that you are generous and that she admires that quality about you, most likely you will think to yourself, "she is right, I am a giving person." Now imagine if a short time later, this same co-worker approached you and asked if she could borrow something. Do you think that you would be more or less likely to comply with her request? Scientific studies have consistently shown that the rate of compliance with such a request would be extremely high because this request is asking you to act in a way that is in line with the previously disclosed positive label. [9] [10] [11]

2. Liking

Another potent, yet often overlooked way to positively influence someone is to reveal to that person that you genuinely like him or her. For instance, think back to a time when you found out that another person said something positive about you. Did your view of that person change? If you are like most people, almost instinctively you began to look more favorably upon that person. This is because of the scientifically verified social norm: we like those who like us.[12] [13] The reason that likeability matters is because scientific research has shown that your ability to influence another is enhanced when that person perceives you in a positive way.[14] [15] [16] [17] As Freud profoundly summarized, "One cannot explain things to unfriendly people."[18]

However, it is imperative that when you demonstrate that you like another person that you do so in a truthful manner. A shallow, disingenuous compliment is easy to recognize and is ultimately counter-productive. A straightforward method for showing that you genuinely like another person is to simply identify something about the person that you sincerely admire. This could be anything from his or her clothing, work performance, physical features or character quality. Once you have detected something that you honestly like, verbally communicate it to that person. When you do this you will find that two things simultaneously occur. First, the person will look more favorably upon you and be more receptive to a persuasive appeal. Second, by publically stating that you like the person, your perception of that individual will also be enhanced and you will treat him or her in a more constructive manner. These two factors will cause your interaction to be enriched and your ability to positively influence this individual will also be amplified.

3. Social Proof

A third, highly prominent principle of influence is social proof. Social proof is a well-established principle that has been scientifically studied for over one hundred years.[19]   Social scientists define social proof as the belief that an idea or behavior is correct to the extent that others engage in it. Scientists attest that social proof is an innate desire and social norm that guides one in connecting the persuasiveness of an idea or behavior with how others are responding to it. This is why people are drawn to best-selling books, blockbuster movies, busy restaurants and businesses that have many satisfied customers.   Moreover, the influence of social proof is amplified when those from one's peer group embrace the idea or behavior.[20] [21] For example, a research published in the New England Journal of Medicine identified that when someone becomes obese the probability that the person's close friends will also become obese tripled.[22]   Scientific studies have also found that one of the primary factors whether or not teens begin smoking or binge drinking is whether those in their peer group smoke or drink alcohol excessively.[23] [24] This is also why comedic television shows that have canned audience laughter generate more laughs from viewers. This is even true when viewers are watching the show alone.[25] [26]

The principle of social proof is so well-established that even large companies seek to use it to influence consumers. Ford Motor Company gave away Ford Focus cars to some key influencers so they would be seen driving the car. Hebrew National also sought to activate social proof when it hired "mom squads" to host hotdog get-togethers for friends.[27]   Even the marketing firm that promotes Red Bull energy drink attempted to market Red Bull by filling up popular sidewalk trash cans with empty Red Bull cans.[28]

To trigger social proof you must demonstrate to the person you are attempting to influence that others, preferably in his or her own peer group, have embraced the idea or are engaging in the behavior that you are advocating. When referencing those who have acted in accordance with your suggestion, use phrases such as, "a lot of people" or state the individual's names. This will magnify the persuasiveness of your request because you have positioned what you are recommending as the safe, normal thing to do. Furthermore, by leveraging social proof in your favor you have also made not embracing the proposed idea or behavior abnormal.

Summary

Your ability to influence others is an essential skill because information alone will rarely compel a person to act. What moves people is not mere information, but how that information is presented. This is supported by hundreds of scientific studies that have conclusively proven that a person's perception and interpretation of a persuasive message is shaped by how that message is conveyed. Through utilizing the three previously mentioned scientifically proven principles of influence you will guide others in responding more favorably to you and the ideas you communicate.

About the Author

David Hoffeld is CEO of the Hoffeld Group, a research based sales training, coaching and consulting firm that is the leader in the integration of proven science and sales. The Hoffeld Group takes the repeatable and predictable principles, which science has proven to create and enable influence, out of the laboratory and academic journals and apply them to selling. For a deeper look at the Hoffeld Group's groundbreaking research and innovative sales strategies visit HoffeldGroup.com.

Notes

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