

## Opinion

# Powers of persuasion

By Andrew Hedley, director, Hedley Consulting



WHEN DALE Carnegie said: “There is only one way to get anybody to do anything. And that is by making the other person want to do it”, he struck at the essence of the art of persuasion. In *Verbal Judo* George Thompson reinforced this view: “The goal of persuasion is to generate voluntary compliance...The great communicators have that art. They somehow get people to do what they want them to do by getting them to want to do it.”

Viewed in the context of the resistance that professionals have to being managed (together with the high regard in which they hold their culture of independent thought and action), it is clear that those able to persuade have huge advantages in managing and leading their firms.

In his excellent book, *Influence – The Power of Persuasion*, Robert Cialdini sets out the six principles of psychology that are employed by those most gifted in the art of persuasion. Each plays to a deep-seated human emotion that can be traced back to behaviours and traits that were necessary for the survival of the human race and the development of society. They are so deeply engrained in our psyches that we find it difficult to resist their powers to model our actions and acquiescence. Cialdini illustrates how these tools are used to persuade, as well as the techniques that can be employed to deflect these psychological arrows.

Professionals know all about reciprocity; indeed the ‘you owe me one’ effect drives work allocations and recommendations to clients for large tranches of many professions. Corporate hospitality plays to the same psychology. And it is effective! Observe the limits imposed by many clients as to the levels of entertainment that can be accepted, contrasted with the ostentatious gatherings hosted by some firms, to see the effectiveness of this tool of influence.

Salesmen always seek commitment, because they know that once commitment has been given, the human drive to be consistent with what people have said will be enough to conclude the process. So commitment and consistency should be recognised as one of the most important tools at the disposal of those seeking to influence others. This is the technique often employed by managers in creating a unified team for action: ‘We all agreed to follow this course and this is the natural consequence. We need to see things through!’ Indeed, the most important early stages of any change-management initiative are the creation of burning platforms, the building of a guiding coalition, a shared vision and a collective commitment to change.

Social proof is the psychologist’s explanation for the ‘IBM effect’: ‘All those people can’t be wrong ... can they?’ In everyday life, it’s why restaurants tend to put people in the window seats to appear busy, and why waiters pre-load their tip trays. For professionals, it explains the importance of ranking guides, directories, referrals and recommendations in persuading clients (who are making an important decision about an intangible service) that they are, indeed, on safe ground.

If you like someone, you are more likely to be persuaded by them. The reverse is also true. Persuasive people are often ‘well-liked’, and they spend time doing things that encourage others to like them. Research into client satisfaction demonstrates firms that make it easy to do business with them, are helpful and demonstrate interest in (and commitment to) their clients, score higher. Such activity plays to the same emotional driver.

A position of authority – whether it be the ‘titled’ conman, the officer, the politician, or the managing partner – confers the ability to influence. Quite aside from the direct power that comes with the role of managing partner, for example, the incumbent also has a halo effect of influence on those around him. By his actions and leadership, he persuades others to follow far more effectively than by issuing decrees and enforcing rules with a rod of iron. As Aesop said: “Persuasion is often more effectual than force”.

A deep-seated human trait means that, whenever something is scarce, it becomes a more prized possession. Using scarcity as a tool can be very persuasive. How many ‘must end tonight!’ sales have enticed purchasers who were previously on the fence? How many street-wise professionals have used the pressure of ‘impending work for others that will compete for finite resources’ to persuade their clients to press the start button on a project?

Of course, everyone has an instinct for these persuasion levers, but the ability to use them in practice can be a very powerful tool.

Herbert Smith makes the point in *Persuasion: Understanding, Practice and Analysis* that “Persuasion is a form of influence that predisposes, but does not impose”. Professional firm leaders are immeasurably more effective when they understand and use these powers of persuasion. ■

---

*Andrew Hedley is director of Hedley Consulting and a member of the Managing Partner editorial board. He can be contacted at: [andrew.hedley@hedleyconsulting.com](mailto:andrew.hedley@hedleyconsulting.com)*