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Is Manipulation Ethical?

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Leaders are challenged to alter the behavior of those they lead by influencing them. If there was no need to alter behavior, there would be no need for leadership. The challenge is to alter others' behavior in an ethical manner.

Everyone agrees that using facts and data to alter behavior is on the ethical high ground. However, there are a variety of psychological devices a leader can deploy to influence others and alter their behavior. Sales and marketing professionals regularly use these techniques, which I covered in an article, "[Leverage Human Behavior to Lead Without Authority.](#)" in the 14 January 2011 edition of *Community Post*.



When I teach these psychological principles to project managers, sometimes a class participant will say “that is manipulation.” The word manipulation has a negative context associated with it.

My response to the class is that nothing is wrong with manipulation if it is done with a pure heart and with the best interest of the other party in mind.

I usually follow this up with a question for the class, “Do you love your children?” Many answer yes. I then ask them, “Have you ever manipulated your children?” The class response is usually laughter and smirks, as most have and do manipulate their children while having their child’s best interest at heart. This is positive context manipulation.

In her book, *Influencing with Integrity* [Syntony Publishing, 1987], Genie Z. Laborde addresses manipulation in its negative context, but she is a strong believer in using psychological devices to influence others.

She states “Once you know how to clarify your own desires, you can use the same techniques to clarify the outcomes of any other party involved in communication. Achieving that party’s outcome while you achieve your own is what I call influencing with integrity. Achieving your own outcome at the expense of or even without regard for the other party constitutes manipulation.”

Alexander Zayachkov is a former sales representative and an experienced project manager and consultant. His early sales training taught him that human beings are more motivated by emotion than reason. Knowing this makes him a more effective project manager.

“One of the cornerstones of ethical salesmanship is to create win-win outcomes,” Mr. Zayachkov said. “You may have to sell the need for robust planning. You may have to sell the idea that those closest to the work are the

experts. You may have to sell management on the need to add specific resources.”

Altering human behavior to achieve win-win outcomes is influencing with integrity, or what I call positive context manipulation.

A lot of project managers complain about the behavior of their stakeholders, but these project managers miss opportunity after opportunity to change the behavior of the stakeholders because they lack the sales skills needed to deploy psychological devices. They rely solely on logic and facts.

We are all familiar with the statement “It is not what you say but how you say it.” How you provide the logic and facts is as or more important than the facts themselves.

Understanding how to do this at a high level requires the use of psychological devices. The best leadership advice I ever received was to read sales books. Knowledge of sales will allow you to leverage the emotional aspects of human behavior to get the logical decisions made to create win-win outcomes.

As a leader, you should be aware of and skilled in the application of psychological devices so you can use them to influence others and alter their behavior. As long as you treat those you are influencing with respect and how you would want to be treated, you are on the ethical high ground—creating win-win outcomes. **Psychological devices are too powerful and too effective not to be in your toolkit as a leader.**

Is manipulation ethical? Yes, positive context manipulation is not only ethical but it is often the best course of action. Individuals and organizations sometimes suffer because it is not used frequently enough.



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