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Leverage Human Behavior to Lead Without Authority

By James T. Brown

5 Votes

Project managers are uniquely challenged to lead everyone—from high-level stakeholders to working-level team members, often with little or no direct authority. The person who leads without authority is someone who is well versed in human behavior. He or she can predict human behavior and leverage it to his or her advantage.



Consider a salesperson who has no authority over potential buyers, cannot make them do anything and is often met with initial skepticism. Yet, the best salespeople have the ability to convince many people to take action. How?

A great salesperson has to interpret and understand human behavior. This knowledge is then used to build relationships, assess motivation and use techniques that generate powerful psychological responses. Project managers who have to lead without authority are required to do the same.

Commitment and Consistency

One well-documented human behavior trait that generates powerful psychological responses is “*commitment and consistency*.” You can effectively use this trait to increase the likelihood of people staying on course with deliverables and decisions.

The premise of *commitment and consistency* is simple. Psychological research shows people like to be consistent with their previous actions and affirmations. If a team member owes you a deliverable on the 20th, he or she is more likely to be on schedule if the team member had made a previous affirmation (verbal and/or written) for the completion date. As a project manager you should seek affirmations on important items like delivery dates, leadership support, and so forth. Reinforce the affirmations made by following up with an advance “thank you” for team members’ commitment. This technique can be used in a one-on-one situation or in project meetings.

Social Proof

You can also gain strong commitment with the psychological response trait of “*social proof*”—a human characteristic that makes us comply with something because others are doing it.

For example, you may approach a high-level stakeholder, and say: “Two other executives have agreed to review and sign all project deliverables within two business days to avoid unnecessary project delays. I also need your commitment.” It’s more difficult for the stakeholder not to commit because there is *social proof* that others have made the same commitment. Once the commitment is made, compliance is much more likely because of *commitment and consistency*.

Leading without authority is an ability to use the knowledge of human behavior to contextually discern circumstances and individuals in order to take actions (often very subtle actions that others do not even

recognize) to produce the desired outcome. The psychological responses of *commitment and consistency* and *social proof* are just two ways in which project managers can influence the behavior of others in support of project objectives. Which other human traits do you use to lead without authority?

Additional Resources:

The following three books are foundational in understanding human behavior and increasing your ability to lead without authority:

1. *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie
2. *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, Baltasar Gracián
3. *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, Robert B. Cialdini



Dr. James T. Brown is president of the project management training company, [SEBA Solutions Inc.](#), and the web-based provider of professional development units (PDUs) for PMI credential holders, [OnePdu.com](#). He is author of [The Handbook of Program Management](#) published by McGraw-Hill and a keynote speaker on project management topics. Please send your questions or comments to [Dr. Brown](#).

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